

Preserving Okawa Elementary School is the right thing to do

BY SHAUN O'DWYER

SPECIAL TO THE JAPAN TIMES

COMMENTARY / JAPAN

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FUKUOKA – Last week, Ishinomaki City in Miyagi Prefecture decided to preserve Okawa Elementary School, where 74 students, 10 staff, a school bus driver and an unconfirmed number of local residents were killed by the massive tsunami that struck on March 11, 2011, in the wake of the Great East Japan Earthquake. I believe the city made the right choice, for the school's remains can bear witness to the institutional and individual decisions that contributed to the tragedy. But in view of the controversy over what happened that day, this opinion needs explanation.

I first visited Okawa Elementary School in late 2014. I felt strangely detached, as if I was inspecting a site of some remote historical event rather than of the 3/11 disaster. Everything appeared so close as I stood in the schoolyard where everyone had assembled after the earthquake struck at 2:46 p.m. that day. The wooded hillside where they could easily have reached safety stood before me, and 200 meters away was the Kitakami River bridge, which they had begun evacuating to at around 3:36 p.m. — just as the tsunami swelled over the river embankment toward them.

I visited again in January with Toshiro Sato, whose daughter Mizuho died there on 3/11, and this time it was different. Staring at the caved-in reinforced concrete walls, the buckled second story floors and a toppled concrete walkway, I listened as he spoke of the heavy debris which the tsunami dammed up against the buildings, and crashed through them. I couldn't bear to think what that mass of water, mud and debris had done to its human victims.

As we were leaving we met another bereaved parent visiting with some journalists. He and Sato knew each other, for their children had been classmates. The photojournalist I was with stepped forward to take his photograph; he held up a funerary portrait of his son, and there was both pride and grief in his face. Later I remembered him from a Telegraph news interview. He had recounted survivors' testimony about his son, one of the children who raised their voices in vain to their teachers as they dithered in those 50 minutes after the earthquake:

"If we stay here we'll die. Let's go up the hill ... you're a teacher, why can't you understand?"

Why did they stay? Why couldn't the teachers understand? Some have suggested that the collectivist culture and top-down bureaucratism of Japanese education explains the children's obedience and the teachers' inertia. But at most other schools along the Tohoku coast, teachers efficiently evacuated their students, or students evacuated themselves.

Without discounting cultural explanations I thought there was also something peculiar about the circumstances at Okawa Elementary School that day, and this was confirmed to me during my interview with Sato.

Sato, a school teacher who helped evacuate his own students to safety in Onagawa, also in Miyagi Prefecture, on 3/11, has become a disaster prevention consultant and educator since then. As he spoke I realized I was listening to both a bereaved father and a historian of the recent past, dispassionately reconstructing the behavior of the teachers and institutional authorities in the lead up to the disaster. One thing he stressed to me was that after the earthquake "information was coming in to the school."

There was a school bus that had arrived before the earthquake. Its driver was in radio contact with his colleagues, and was receiving updates about the situation on the coast. Sato told me that the bus company had radioed the driver saying "a tsunami's coming, get the children aboard and evacuate".

An investigation by the Sendai newspaper Kahoku Shinpo, citing a bus company colleague, also mentions this evacuation call. The driver was still waiting for the teachers' instructions when the tsunami reached him.

Some parents arriving to pick up their children just before and after 3:00 p.m. also brought information about a tsunami alert. A mother who warned of the approaching tsunami was told to calm down. Sometimes unclear survivors' testimony described discussions involving teachers and local residents over what to do. Some of them wondered whether it might be better to evacuate up the hill. "A tsunami can't come this far" was one reply. Another mentioned the possibilities of aftershocks and falling trees endangering an uphill evacuation.

Survivors recall hearing a tsunami evacuation alert at about 3:25 p.m. By then, tsunami waves had hit the coastline four km from the school.

This all seems very damning. It's been said that the teachers cannot be judged with the benefit of hindsight — that they could not have known what was coming. If we just assume the gold standard notion of knowledge, what philosophers might call a "justified true belief" that an unprecedentedly powerful tsunami was heading to Okawa, this is a fair judgment.

A more reasonable expectation is that the teachers should have taken the incoming information seriously enough to grasp the probabilities it suggested. They should have known that, on balance, it was safer evacuating to high ground than heading to the river embankment — and they should have acted on that knowledge.

But they didn't know, or they weren't confident enough to act unilaterally or collectively on what they knew. That is the enduring mystery of the disaster, and those who can help solve it are all dead. But Sato has his own insights into what happened. There were, he thought, three biases apparent in the lead up to the disaster.

The first bias arose from the school's distance from the sea. "There was an assumption that a tsunami could not come up the river". The second bias arose from the fact that from the schoolyard "they could not see the river or the ocean" (and somehow didn't appoint a lookout). Finally, there was what Sato called a "school bias." Under this he classed both the culture and personalities particular to this small rural school and the institutional habits of schools in general, in which there is an inclination toward "making decisions in the same manner as before."

At Nobiru Elementary School, another inland school near Ishinomaki, a similar combination of biases prevailed when there was a chance to evacuate to high ground (the principal also feared the possibility of landslides there). Thirteen adult evacuees subsequently died in its flooded gymnasium.

In key individuals at both schools these biases likely generated a "normalcy bias." Official hazard maps using 20th century tsunami data that marked these schools as evacuation centers outside inundation zones, folk memory of the 1960 tsunami caused by the Chile quake and a lack of evacuation training contributed to indecision and bad choices — and culpably in Okawa School's case — and to a discounting of information which didn't fit with what was believed to be possible.

It didn't have to be that way. From 2005, Gunma University Engineering professor Toshitaka Katada piloted a disaster preparedness program in the schools of Kamaishi City in Iwate Prefecture. Students were trained to think for themselves and flee for their own lives in disaster situations, and not to rely on directives from authority or hazard map information.

After the 3/11 earthquake Kamaishi students promptly evacuated to high ground, including from schools marked in "safe zones" on hazard maps, and encouraged others along the way to follow them. Over 1,000 people died in Kamaishi on March 11, but no student attending school that day was killed.

All things considered, it makes sense to preserve Okawa Elementary School as a memorial, as a warning and as a site for such disaster education. Tetsuya Tadano, one of the few students who survived the disaster, had an educational purpose in mind in a recorded message to a February meeting held in Ishinomaki to decide the school's fate. While acknowledging the views of bereaved parents who wanted it demolished, Tadano believed its preservation was "absolutely essential in order to pass down unfaded memories of 3/11, so that even one life out of many can be saved in a future disaster."

Shaun O'Dwyer is an associate professor in the School of Languages and Cultures at Kyushu University, and a co-director of It's Not Just Mud, a disaster-relief NPO based in Ishinomaki City.