

# Inequities in Japanese Urban Schools

June A. Gordon

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Interviews with Japanese public school educators allow a distinctive view of how the continuing economic decline in Japan has affected educational motivation and decision-making among students and parents. The nature of socioeconomic stratification within Japanese educational opportunity is seen as a continuing situation exacerbated by the costs of education in a context of chronic economic uncertainty.

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**KEY WORDS:** economic conditions; Japan; schooling; teachers.

The research reported here attempts to understand how public school educators in urban Japan view the changing conditions and prospects of their students' lives amidst sustained economic stagnation.<sup>1</sup> This research is part of an international project looking at critical issues facing the teaching profession in Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The overall goal of the three-country research is to understand how elementary and secondary public school teachers respond to the needs of marginalized youth attending schools in low-income, urban communities that are facing political, economic, and demographic crises.<sup>2</sup> In Japan the project seeks to understand the role of social and economic stratification in how schooling provides for the social mobility of marginalized groups.<sup>3</sup> As a non-Japanese researcher, familiar with the culture and language from living and working in Japan for short periods during the past thirty years, I faced the dilemma of any outsider asking difficult questions that have arisen from my own

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research of a society that sees itself as impenetrable and unknowable. Even with substantial engagement and access to the Japanese educational establishment, one approaches the task of understanding the role of schooling in Japan with an extraordinary degree of caution. Japan is a complex society struggling with modernity while deeply wed to traditions and habits of life that remain obscured to even the most seasoned observer. Any comparisons with U.S. conditions must be postponed and perhaps avoided entirely while we strive to inform ourselves of the challenges facing Japanese society.

## RESEARCH PROCESS

In 2001 I returned to Japan to begin formal interviews based on earlier work during visits begun in 1996. Trusted and valued contacts from my prior visits paved the way for personal introductions into some of the more inaccessible parts of Japanese society: low income, marginalized communities and the schools that serve them. These are not the schools that most foreigners think of as they conjure up outdated images of orderly and well-disciplined Japanese classrooms (Mochizuki, 1989). Nor do the parents of these students fit the profile of the stay-at-home *kyoikumama* and the *salariman* father. Many of these schools are referred to as *konanko*, or difficult schools (Komine, 2000), though few teachers who teach in them would admit to such a nomenclature. These schools serve low-income Japanese kids whose parents barely survive the high-priced living conditions of urban Japan and often face serious emotional, financial, housing, and/or health problems. But these are also the schools who traditionally have served the children of “outsiders:” Korean Japanese, Burakumin, Okinawan, and now the Newcomers, immigrants who have arrived since the 1980s, largely from China, South America, and Southeast Asia.

Over the course of two months, interviews were conducted with 25 teachers and 6 principals working in Osaka and Tokyo middle and high schools. The interviews by the author were, with a few exceptions, conducted in Japanese. A Japanese graduate student, Aya, who had been lent to me by Professor Hiroshi Ikeda (one of the leading sociology professors at Osaka University at that time but now deceased), accompanied me to the interviews and took responsibility for taking notes and handling the tape recordings while I proceeded with the formalities and questions. During this first stage of formal interviews her presence and companionship were invaluable. Even though she did not take a leading role in the interviewing process, her connection with Professor Ikeda and her native fluency in the Osaka dialect provided the respondents and myself with a level of comfort and assurance that if we got stuck, she could, and did, graciously pull us through. I did not realize until later that Professor Ikeda had offered her

services to me as a part of her formal graduate study so that she might learn how to do ethnographic research. I was her instructor as well as she my research assistant. This changed the dynamics significantly. After each interview we would go to a *kisaten* (coffee shop) and debrief the process and the content. She would ask me how I knew what to ask next when it wasn't on the set of prescribed questions, how did I read their body language, and what did I think about such and such a response. Her inquiries and insights shed a whole new level of light onto what would otherwise have already been a powerful process.

Since several interviews took place within a week, it was not possible for her to transcribe all of the interviews as we went along. Instead, she produced one transcribed interview early on in the process to see if she was on track with regards to what was needed and wanted. Thereafter she usually completed one a week until all were transcribed. I advised her to add her own observations and insights to the end of the interviews so that she could make conscious her ideas as well as for me to gain from both our informal conversations and her later reflection on the process. Aya, while not a trained sociologist at the time, comes from a family of educators, her father a principal who has worked in a variety of schools and observed first hand the impact of economic changes on the lives of students and their families. She held informal conversations with him pertaining to some of the topics under study and shared these with me as well, hence providing a multilayer portrait of the complex issues of education for low-income youth in Japan.

The research process ran in two parallel tracks, intersecting and converging at frequent intervals. On the one hand, I was engaged almost daily in extensive interviews with teachers and principals, most of whom were in schools with students from low-income or marginalized backgrounds. On the other hand, I spent many of my evenings and weekends in intensive discussions with human rights activists, from both the university and community, who have committed their lives to understanding how marginalized young people and their families negotiate and adapt to the constraints of life in Japan and, in particular, to the rigidity of Japanese classroom culture. In addition to this, I supplemented my knowledge with a review of the research literature on education, sociology, history, economics and human rights in English with translations of several relevant books and articles available only in Japanese. On-going communication with Japanese colleagues as my questions arose gave an edge to this research which kept me abreast of the thinking within the academic community in Japan even though I found many situations in schools that contradicted what I had heard and read. While extensive discussions with some of Japan's leading experts in this field provided an opportunity to work through ideas and hypotheses, my primary source of information on students' lives and

academic prospects came from Japanese teachers and principals who work in junior and senior high schools.

The quotes used below have been rendered in conversational English rather than as literal translations. The names of teachers have been omitted to protect the confidentiality of the interviewees and the schools are identified only by general location and level. The interviews took place at the school of each informant after I spent time observing classes and participating in informal conversations with principals, teachers and students. Access to schools was arranged by faculty members of Osaka University, Osaka City University, and Senshu University in Tokyo who had spent significant amount of time in schools and had gained the trust of the principals and local authorities so that my presence was seen as an extension of this relationship, in some ways a gift rather than an intrusion. On average each formal interview lasted about one and a half hours. In several cases, time was also allotted for interaction and conversations with students on some of these topics. The schools are identified either by prefecture, Kyoto or Osaka, or by city, Osaka or Tokyo. Overall, the interviews and consultations explored the effects of Japan's changing economic context on attitudes towards schooling held by students, parents, and teachers and the resulting alteration of expectations and aspirations for further education and careers.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

I have presented my findings by interspersing comments from the interviews with background information in order to illustrate several important components of the situation faced by Japanese teachers. My hope is that providing access to these teachers' voices will provide insights as to how the economic crisis has affected teachers and their profession in meeting the needs and aspirations of marginalized students and their families. To begin, I offer a comment that captures a crucial aspiration of Japanese people, one that influences all aspects of their lives.

It is often said that Japanese people are middle class or upper middle but this is not really true. I think the idea [of middle classes] comes from Confucianism, what I would call, "the spirit of moderation," where middle-class means "moderation;" to Japanese; it means that people do not have any trouble in their daily lives, I think. (Osaka City, Male High School Teacher)

Japan has perpetuated the mythology of itself as a middle-class society since the end of World War II. While most Japanese are aware that the woman working long hours in the tofu shop or the man selling parts as a

subcontractor, not to mention those who work in factories, earn radically different wages and have far lower social position than the average *salaryman*, when you ask a Japanese person to delineate the social stratification within their society, you will usually receive the response “we are a middle class society.” It has taken the economic crisis of the 1990s, which has shocked many middle-class families, for people to openly acknowledge the economic variation and class divisions that have always existed in Japan. Teachers are on the front lines of this realization and are confronted daily with examples of the shift, which can be as subtle as a half-empty *obento* (lunch box) or as powerful as a father losing his job and committing suicide (Kudomi, 1999).

**Question:** Do conditions at home influence students’ grade?

**Answer:** Yes, I think they do. When students have lost their aims because of their economic difficulties at home, they also lose interest in studying or coming to school. They begin to feel it is useless to work hard. Few work harder all the more because they are in a difficult situation. (Osaka Prefecture, Female High School Teacher)

As the Japanese economy entered its second decade of financial decline in the year 2002, the belief system that has sustained educational motivation and has been the object of both praise and questioning by scholars in and out of Japan continued to unravel at an alarming rate. Ishida (1993, 2001) has offered a comprehensive critique of Japan’s belief in the rewards of academic effort while Kariya and Rosenbaum (1995, 1999) provide a defense of Japanese schooling based on a meritocratic motivation enforced by entrance exams (Fujita, 1989). The exams are the most controversial aspect of Japanese schooling and their role in Japanese education and culture have been examined by Amano (1989, 1990) and Shimahara (1979) among many others. Okano and Tsuchiya (1999) have provided the best recent review in English of schooling and inequality in Japan. The collection of Shields (1989) offered a very useful analysis of the factors that set the stage for developments of the past two decades. Students’ resistance to traditional schooling as presented in graphic fashion by Yoneyama (1999) has combined with teachers’ confusion about mandated educational reforms as analyzed by Fujita (2000) to create a scenario of chaos and unpredictability in many Japanese classrooms unlike anything in the post-war era.

**Question:** How do your students see their future?

**Answer:** In Japan today, about 97% of junior high school students go to high school. If they do not choose high school, then, they go to a special school, such as a vocational training school (*senshu gakko* or *kakushu gakko*) or get a part-time

job. It is very difficult for these students to get full-time work. Today, more and more students go to university, and to tell the truth, it is getting easier and easier to get into university, if you do not mind which one. But it is difficult to enter if you have economic disadvantage. Students today, however, do not wish to study in university; they do not find reasons to study there, and choose to go to special school in order to get some license. Still, it is difficult to get a full-time job even after university. (Kyoto Prefecture, Male Junior High School Teacher)

As the connection between education and employment carefully presented by Kariya and Rosenbaum (1999) has become more tenuous, young people, and many of their parents, have questioned the time and resources expected to survive and succeed within an educational system that for all intents and purposes is out of date and out of step with the demands of a postindustrial global world culture. The resulting distrust of the system is not without validity. Jobs for college graduates have become more scarce, particularly as they compete with less-qualified, lower-wage workers who have either dropped out of high school or who have graduated but opted not to continue on to college or university. Further competition for quotidian jobs comes from middle-aged workers who have been laid off, senior citizens who cannot survive on their pensions, guest workers recruited during the bubble economy, wives of laid-off workers, and a growing army of day laborers.

**Question:** How do your students see their future?

**Answer:** The economic condition can affect student future choices very much, I think. Students make choices, for example, not because they want to do it but because they think it is useful. I have seen some students who gave up going to university because their family cannot afford it. Nowadays, few students try hard to pursue their dreams because it seems hopeless. (Osaka Prefecture, Male High School Teacher)

**Answer:** The number of companies that employ high school graduates is decreasing. It is also true of university graduates. It is getting more and more difficult for youngsters to be employed in companies and as a result they become *freetaa*s [young people who leave school early and do part-time jobs]. Some companies have begun to restructure themselves, so another problem is the dismissal of middle-aged workers. Companies are trying to change, but economic situation in Japan still has difficulties. Nowadays they do not choose people by their academic background any more, which is what parents of this school's children do not realize. (Tokyo, Male Junior High School Teacher)

With few options in the way of employment, one might expect students to remain in school longer, but as difficult as it is for most parents to accept,

many are finding that they cannot afford the high cost of education for their children, particularly if it includes, in addition to public school fees, private tutoring in *juku*, and four years of study at university, four years that lack much coherence or relevance other than allowing a young person to mature after managing the pressures of an exam-based pre-collegiate curriculum (McVeigh, 2002; Ono 2001).

**Question:** How significant is the role of *juku* in academic success?

**Answer:** Students of economically disadvantaged families are able to get scholarships when they go to high school, but if they want to go to *juku*, it is not enough to pay for it. (Kyoto Prefecture, Male Junior High School Teacher)

**Answer:** I think economic conditions of parents have a big influence on students' grades. Students whose parents can afford to let them go to *juku* get good grades actually, even though some students from poor families are also making efforts. Students who go to *juku* give priority to homework from the *juku* instead of from school, because they pay for it! When they get sick, parents let their children cut school but make them go to *juku* instead. Even if parents get into economic difficulties, they try as hard as possible for their children. It is the last choice for them to cut off their children's educational expenses. (Tokyo, Female Junior High School Teacher)

For a country that has placed such high stakes on an educational system's ability to provide for an equitable distribution of talent and, thereby, security for the state, the rupture in the system has been staggering for all concerned. While everyone in Japan hopes for a return of prosperity and the promise of upward mobility, teachers face the daily consequences of this precarious period as they work with students who increasingly question the belief that their effort in school will lead to success in life. These students cannot be faulted for lacking the intense motivation to succeed through the kind of effort in school that served their parents well. School has become a much less urgent matter for a wide majority of students who lack the aspiration or incentive to compete for prestigious university admission and the promise of professional life, while continuing to enjoy the comforts of largesse provided by parents still eager to meet their children's desires (Kudomi 1999).

As discussed by Shimizu and Shimizu (2001), Japanese teachers are expected to be blind to differences and, as a result, treat all students the same, even when this means that some students are unable to keep up with the curriculum due to poverty, lack of knowledge of the language or culture of Japan, and/or the demands of family life. Recent reforms introduced at national and local levels are attempting to alter this long held belief by stressing the role of individuality and creativity and the acceptance of ability

tracking, in practice if not in theory, within junior high school as well as the return to tracking among senior high schools, reversing a trend that Kariya and Rosenbaum (1999) convincingly argued was reinforcing social stratification through the choice of private schooling by families who could afford the cost. Japanese teachers who have the experience of working with students from low-income families are quick to admit the effects of economic hardship on schooling, while continuing to express the view that teachers must treat all students equally and that those students who work hard will succeed in spite of such hardship. As Japanese children move through compulsory schooling to the all-important choice of which high school they will attend, the role of economic advantage steadily grows in importance. *Juku* attendance is the major factor that favors those families with financial means to provide a steady supplement of exam-oriented instruction that pays no attention to the egalitarian ethos of the public elementary and junior high school. Without *juku* support, even the successful junior high student faces substantial financial costs if he or she is to attend academic high schools that serve as the necessary bridge to university admission. Private high schools that offer an alternative path (Benjamin and James, 1989), although usually to private universities (Ono, 2001), present an even more daunting cost to the family. This pattern of discrimination based on financial resources within Japanese schooling has been a reality since the 1960s in spite of strong beliefs in equality among teachers and compulsory schooling through junior high school (Rohlen, 1977). The economic good times of the 1970s and 1980s provided an increasing number of Japanese families with the means to provide the necessary supplemental schooling and soften the competitive reality enforced by examinations for high school and university admission but economic hard times have widened the gap to an unsettling degree as expressed by Japanese teachers.

Japanese parents are veterans of a period of unequalled national prosperity and pride. Even though some teachers shared that experience, many of them, over 50 years of age, grew up during leaner times and question the indulgence of the parents of the children they now teach.

**Question:** What is the role of parents in schooling?

**Answer:** People who were born in the 1960s attended high school without any purpose. They were told that they would not be able to have a better life unless they went to high school. This had more important meaning for their generation. Parents today were not taught about the importance of education at home when they were young, and they can not tell that to their children, either. They say that they are just satisfied if their children graduate from high school. Therefore, it becomes difficult for students today to understand the importance of education or the reason to study. It has something to do with their economic background as well, I think. (Osaka Prefecture, Male High School Teacher)



**Answer:** There are two types of parents' attitude toward their children: first, parents who could not get into high school, or could not afford to go, wish their children to go to high school. The other type is parents who know they can live comfortably even if they did not go to high school; they do not see the benefit of their children getting an education. I think it necessary to make children acquire the habit of studying at home, and thus, it is a must to get the parents' agreement or cooperation. (Kyoto Prefecture, Male Junior High School Teacher)

Parents' increased education has ironically created a much more unstable and vulnerable position for teachers, placing them under more scrutiny while providing them with less support. The role of the teacher has changed from a smoothly functioning contributor within a socially sanctioned educational system to that of a substitute parent expected to facilitate creativity and individuality while maintaining the vaunted achievements of Japanese education (Kudomi, 1992, 1995). Indulgence of children combined with guilt of parents, unaware of how to guide their children in a world of rapidly changing norms and opportunities, has not only shifted responsibility for discipline from the home to the school but also left teachers with the impossible task of providing the guidance necessary for motivating steady attention to academic effort when the economic rewards are no longer clearly demarcated (Shimizu, 1992).

**Question:** Do you have students with single parents?

**Answer:** More and more students come from a single-parent family. It seems to be one of the recent trends in Japan. I think it is important for teachers to remember such information when we have contact with students because those students may have some problems at home. We have to pay special attention to them. Students from motherless families tend to do the housework all by themselves; as a result, they have stress at home and lose interest in school. Some stop coming to school because of that. I think it is important to remember their family backgrounds and pay attention to them. Of course their privacy shouldn't be invaded. (Osaka Prefecture, Female High School Teacher)

**Answer:** I have a student who does not have a mother. So he/she has to do all the housework and he/she has begun to lose interest in studying. I would like the community to help those children, but people are expected to solve their own problems by themselves and, therefore, they cannot share problems together. As a result, children suffer. (Osaka Prefecture, Male High School Teacher)

Japanese education faces a paradox initiated by the attempt to integrate traditional approaches to schooling with a post-war occupation-imposed philosophy of equal opportunity that Japanese leaders resisted but that the newly resurgent teachers' union embraced. The resulting ideology among teachers is that all students receive the same schooling with those students

exerting the most effort rising to the top. Responsibility for a lack of effort could be shared by students, parents, and teachers, but ultimately, the student is the main agent of success or failure. Within this system of schooling, success would be decided by entrance examinations to secondary schools; schools that embodied quite different pathways to adulthood (Rohlen, 1983). Until the economic difficulties of the 1990s, the vast majority of Japanese continued to believe in the mythology that each child did indeed have an equal opportunity as long as she/he put forth effort, disregarding the reality that working hard usually meant having the economic means to attend private *juku* as well as regular school. It was possible for people to de-emphasize economic advantages since generally it was a time of rising prosperity that disguised the plight of low-income people (Aoki, 2000), Newcomers, Koreans and Burakumin. Marginalization based on cultural discrimination continues to be a reality faced by Japanese young people of Buraku identity, as recently documented by Noguchi (2000), Ikeda (1999), and Nabeshima (1995), and those of Korean descent, as shown by the work of Motani (2002), Hicks (1997), Tsuneyoshi (2002) and Kim (1999). More recently, children of “guest workers,” or *dekasegi*, primarily Brazilian- and Peruvian-Japanese, welcomed to Japan during the boom years of the 1970s and 1980s, have faced the challenge of gaining acceptance and access to full participation within contemporary Japan as helpfully analyzed by Kanagae (2000), Tsuda (2001), Reis (2001), Linger (2001), and Hirota (2001). In smaller but noticeable numbers, refugees and immigrants of the past three decades from China, Korea, Southeast Asia, the Philippines and many other countries continue to flow, legally and illegally, into a society uncertain about its economic future and tentative about the role of these “Newcomers.” Shimizu (1998) has led in the study of schooling among Newcomer children and attempts to improve their tenuous hopes for success in Japanese education. Marginalization also includes the ostracization of students who appear “different” due to their appearance or behavior. Along with cultural discrimination, the reality of economic discrimination has become a much more visible factor in Japanese schooling. Conversations about those who do not “fit” into Japanese society are few. The collection edited by Weiner (1997) and the more polemical work of Smith (1994) provide ample introduction to these issues.

**Question:** Has the economic situation affected certain groups within Japanese schools more than others?

**Answer:** There used to be no relation between economic conditions and students' grades in school even for Buraku children, but now there is. A main feature of Buraku people's home is that they have no books, no newspapers, or anything with letters [*kanji*, the Japanese writing system] on it at home, and TV is on all day

long. Another is the language they use at home: it is a direct form as “Do this” or “Don’t do that.” The rhythm of their lives has a great influence on their children, I think. (Kyoto Prefecture, Female Junior High School Teacher)

**Answer:** While many people in Buraku communities are poor, their children have many good things at home. Their parents could not go to high school because of economic difficulty. Some of those parents have spent a lot of time caring for their children, however, some of them do not do anything and just depend on us, teachers. Some of them even do not know how to raise children. They have classes to learn about that in their district. Some of the elder people cannot read. For those people they have classes for literacy. Today I do not see distinctive differences between Buraku people and the poor, however, there is discrimination against Buraku people for employment and marriage. Discrimination of Buraku people is peculiar in Japan and there is no reason for it. (Tokyo, Male Junior High School Teacher)

**Answer:** I do not think there is some disadvantage for students from Buraku or Korean/Chinese background when they make their future plans. It really depends on each family. Some families save money for their children, even if they are poor. Of course, it is easier for students who do not have any difficulty in their economic conditions at home to change their plans when they wish to do. (Osaka Prefecture, Female High School Teacher)

## CONCLUSION

When the Bubble burst, it exposed those who were marginally middle class: more mothers had to work since men were laid off; there was less money for *juku*; there was a break down in the link between a college degree and employment; and there was a decrease in interest on the part of both parents and students to continue with schooling, in particular, to make the effort required for competition for admission to the best high schools. Previously, private schools and universities assisted those who could not, or would not, compete in the public school arena. Money is now less available to position those who fail the traditional system. This is particularly true for women as gender remains an overriding source of discrimination once secondary schooling is complete. Marginally middle-class parents question the worth of four years at university if it is, as traditionally viewed, a playground, a break from the pressures of studying prior to entering the corporate world. Japanese families, who have traditionally used between 20 and 30% of their income on their children’s schooling, question whether the investment is a wise one when resources are limited. If there is no job guarantee after college, why attend? Why waste four years of potential income?

As Japan’s economic conditions have worsened since the early 1990s, the economic factors in school access and success have continued to favor more

prosperous families and, simultaneously, have disadvantaged middle-class families who aspire to professional and managerial careers for their children. Families with minimal resources or prospects for their children's social mobility have continued to suffer a lack of opportunity. Things have not changed for those at the top and the bottom, it is the middle class who are most affected, whose prospects are at risk. I found the Japanese teachers willing to share their views that young people, marginalized by inadequate family income, unstable home life and/or cultural discrimination who are often consigned to less competitive high schools, are even less likely to succeed in negotiating the many hurdles guarding access to the teaching profession.

In the face of economic crisis, Japanese youth are confused. Their outward signs of rebellion are not just a fashion. *Freetaa* (unattached teen workers), *ochikobore* (students who fall behind academically), *kogyarumama* (teen mothers), *tōkōkyōhi* (school refusers), and other forms of outward resistance towards teachers and parents are all indicators that point to the underlying loss of direction maintained within Japan's long success with meritocracy. Facing the shattering disillusionment that the educational structure can no longer make good on its promise that claims a correspondence between hard work, high exam scores, entrance to a good high school, acceptance to a prestigious university *and* guaranteed access to a good-paying corporate position for life, parents and teachers are at a loss as to how to motivate young people. While parents are accused by teachers and administrators of renegeing on their responsibility as "first teachers" and caregivers of their children, parents blame teachers for being out of touch with the needs of contemporary youth. With the educational/employment contract no longer in place, teachers must contend with both rising expectations and decreasing opportunities for their students, while political leaders attempt to blame teachers for failing to provide appropriately prepared workers for the nation.

## NOTES

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