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Education and Social Disparities in Japan

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Summary and Keywords

The Japanese education system was once recognized globally, at least until the end of the 1980s, as one that was both high in quality and highly egalitarian. This unique success was achieved in the process of Japan's rapid modernization. How has this success achieved? How "unique" was the key issue of disparities? These are among the most crucial questions to comprehend regarding Japanese education. The double standard of equality emerging from Japan's two stages (i.e., prewar and postwar) of modernization combined the postwar ideas of equality in education and the prewar legacy of school hierarchy, together producing an acute tension in education. This tension-laden equality succeeded to some extent in reducing and justifying disparities in education in Japan's catch-up modernization process. Recent education reforms have purported to throw off the yoke of a system driven by a desire to catch up with advanced Western countries, which is hereafter called "the catch-up type of education." However, these reforms have in fact only produced unintended results in terms of educational equality. Japanese experiences therefore show us both success and failure in education, but at the same time these experiences can also teach us the contradictory nature of the roles that education is expected to play.

Keywords: Japan, education, equality, disparity, modernization, meritocracy, all middle class society, incentive divide, bright flight

Introduction

There is a widespread view of Japanese education, one widespread among both scholars and the general public, that persists even today: Japanese students' academic performance is among the highest among advanced countries even while the distribution of academic disparities within the population is among the lowest, while, at the same time, educational opportunities for upper secondary and tertiary education are among the highest in the world and higher levels of education are widely available to young people, despite relatively small public investments. This image of Japanese education peaked in the 1980s, a time when Japan's educational system was regarded as one of the highest in quality anywhere in the world. It was at this time that Japan became the envy of many nations worldwide for its combination of efficiency and equality. Cummings (1980), for example, argued that academic achievements of Japanese students in mathematics and sciences not only resulted in higher scores but also smaller disparities in distribution than those in other advanced societies. In the wake of Nation at Risk (U.S. National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), the U.S. Department of Education (1987) also applauded the high performance of Japanese students in comparison with their American counterparts. The high reputation of Japanese education was often linked explicitly with the high performance of Japan's economy, with education seen as one key factor in producing high-performing human resources who would later become Japan's corporate warriors and make it possible for Japan to emerge as "Number One" (Vogel, 1979). Japan's so-called "high-growth era" unfolding during the 1960s and 1970s also began to be explained as a "miracle" using the same set of ideas: Lacking natural resources, human resources were thought to play a key role in Japan's "miraculous" economic recovery out of the ashes of the Second World War. Viewed as not only driving economic growth but also equalizing income distributions and increasing social mobility among the population, education was praised as being a major driving force in the unprecedented recovery and prosperity of postwar Japan.

And indeed, among all OECD countries, Japan was one of the most equal societies in terms of income distribution in 1970s and 1980s (Cummings, 1980). Until the end of the 1980s, the vast majority of Japanese populace believed the myth that they were "middle class." Most even believed that Japan as a whole was an "all middle class society" (Ishida, 1993; Mori, 2008). Despite the success of education in achieving economic prosperity, subjectively creating the ideal of an "all middle class society" among the populace and objectively engineering a less unequal society (in terms of international comparison), Japanese success has visibly declined since the 1990s in both objective and subjective terms.

This article first discusses how such a unique success was achieved in the process of Japan's modernization. Second, despite its undeniable success until the early 1990s, it examines how and why Japan's unique feat had started to unravel, in particular in its egalitarian dimensions. Through these arguments, the intent is not only to review specific

changes in Japanese education from the 1990s onward, but also review the factual aspects of education and disparities in Japan and analyze how “uniquely” the key issue of disparities in education has been discussed in the political and popular discourses. Much of this discussion will refer to several key policies that have been implemented in postwar Japan, with the major focus being on the equity implications. Although the case of Japan is the focus, the intent is to provide a point of reference to reflect on policy in other societies, in particular those who are also “latecomers” to the modernization process.

Origins of Japan’s “Egalitarian” Education: The First Stage of Modernization Under the Meiji Constitution

Modern education was established after the Meiji Restoration (1868–1872), as part of the modernization of the whole society and building of the modern nation-state. The first trial of Japanese modernization under the Meiji Constitution established a modern school system. This system became a vital engine for modernization of Japan as a whole. Historians and policymakers in the postwar period conceptualized this first prewar modernization in education as “catching up” with such advanced Western nations as Britain, France, Germany, and the United States (Kariya, 2015; Rappleye & Kariya, 2011; Amano, 2011). In the earliest period, the French system was introduced and emulated, as proclaimed in the Education System Order in 1872, but implementation was delayed due to lack of funding. Later, throughout the first few decades after the Meiji Restoration, the emulation of several other advanced Western nations occurred: at first, American models were dominant, but the focus then shifted to the German system. As time went on, the prewar system in Japan was shaped to become progressively closer to the European continental tradition. Resembling the bipartite or tripartite system of secondary education in Europe, in Japan general and vocational education was sharply distinguished. Moreover, only male students who completed a middle school that provided general education courses were eligible for higher school—the only route to a university education. Female students were eliminated from this route. As with European education systems, the Japanese system maintained elitist tendencies, providing very limited opportunities for tertiary education (Cummings, 1980; Aso & Amano, 1978; Passin, 1965).

Despite the elitist nature of secondary and tertiary education, elementary education expanded rapidly. Within just 30 years since the formal establishment of the modern school system, over 80% of Japanese children were enrolled in four years of elementary school—compulsory at the time (MEXT, 1971). As such, in terms of universalization of elementary education alone, Japan had already caught up with most of advanced nations in Europe up to the end of the 19th century (Aso & Amano, 1978). Japan’s enthusiastic pursuit of modernization powered the expansion of education, all with the aim of

attaining the national goals of building the “rich country and strong army”—goals vital for maintaining independence. In this view, the nations that were “late” to the modernization process had to urgently educate people (at least at elementary level) if they were to stave off subordination in a Western-dominated world.

Such a rapid expansion of elementary education consequently increased the number of graduates who wished to continue on to secondary school. This triggered the subsequent expansion of secondary education opportunities, a process unfolding in the first two decades in the 20th century. While the estimated enrollment rate for secondary education was only 2.9% in 1900, it increased to 15.9% in 1910 and to 25.0% in 1920, and then reached 32.3% in 1925 (MEXT, 1971). This figure placed Japan far ahead of advanced Western European countries at the time. According to Ringer (1979), the enrollment rate for secondary education in the U.K. was only 4% even in 1940, 6.9% in France in 1930, 8.8% in Germany in 1930, while the U.S. counterpart reached 40.5% in 1930. Put differently, accessibility to secondary education in the prewar Japan was provided more equally, as compared with European systems in the early 20th century. The increase in people educated at secondary level, those who would fill roles at the intermediate level of technocrats and white-collar workers in the modern sector, contributed greatly to modernizing the nation.

Behind this rapid expansion of secondary education, there were strong hopes-turned-aspirations among the populace that higher levels of education could offer better life chances by helping them obtain jobs in the “modern sector,” i.e., professional jobs and/or white-collar jobs in public offices or large-sized companies. Liberated from the premodern status (caste) system, where individuals were not allowed to choose occupations freely, people welcomed the newly established education system as a social ladder that they could climb up, whatever their social origins might be. The populace clearly recognized that modern education was the main route to obtain stable employment in the modern sector. At the time, nearly half of the working population worked in agriculture, and many of these were tenant farmers stuck in poor and unstable economic conditions: Education was the visible and most easily understandable symbol for modernization for the populace. This feeling crystallized as an ideology of “*rissin shusse*” (Success in life), a new idea that became widely dispersed among young Japanese males, even amongst those from humble family origins (Amano et al., 1990; Amano, 2011).

Despite such a rapid expansion of secondary education, opportunities in tertiary education remained elitist, with only 1.6% of the same age cohort enrolled in 1920. While the enrollment rate of secondary education increased 8.6 times between 1900 to 1920, enrollment in tertiary education grew much less quickly over the same period (from 0.5% to 1.6% respectively) (MEXT, 1971). This gap naturally resulted in fierce competition to enter higher schools (*kōtō gakkō* in Japanese)—the only gateway to university education. Competition was fierce, it should be noted, despite the fact that female students were completely excluded from this competition.

Since admission decisions for higher schools were made solely on the basis of written entrance exams, such severe competition produced the now infamous “examination hell,” which has been recognized as a long-standing, essential malaise in Japanese education. With prewar government policies lacking a comprehensive ideal of equality in education, the demand for higher education was filled by private institutions, which had flourished even with little public support since 1919.[1]

The expansion of university education opportunities soon resulted in a clearly visible, hierarchical structure for higher education institutions, one in which the Imperial Universities, in particular Tokyo, then Kyoto, were ranked at the top, newly admitted national universities, which were former national vocational colleges, were in the middle, then newly accredited private universities were located on a lower rung. Of course there were exceptions, but this was the general pattern. To get into top-ranked institutions, students had to achieve high marks on the entrance examinations after graduating from elitist higher schools such as the First Higher School in Tokyo and the Third Higher School in Kyoto (Amano, 2011).

This entrance examination competition, in both secondary and higher education, was further accelerated by such a clear hierarchical structure of the institutions, differentiated clearly according to students’ ability tested in entrance examinations as well as schools’ institutional prestige. Students’ future success came to be seen as not simply a matter of passing or failing to be admitted to a secondary school or an institution of higher education, but instead as tightly linked to the rank order of the institution they entered. This examination-driven education operated as a strong driving force in encouraging particularly young males to work hard in school as a means of getting ahead (Amano et al., 1990). The legacy of the hierarchical structure of institutions has remained even after the postwar education reforms, continuing to influence how inequality is shaped in education, but also continuing as a driving force in motivating students to work hard in school. This first stage of educational modernization thus created the idea of meritocracy, a value that was widely recognized and shared in the prewar period.

Basis of Egalitarian Education in the Postwar Period

Overview of the Postwar Education System

Japan’s defeat in the Second World War led to a large number of deep structural reforms across Japanese society, including education. These were initiated by the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP), whose primary aim was to turn Japan into a peaceful and democratic nation. Within this push, education reform was regarded as a primary and integral means of eradicating militarism and inculcating the idea of

democracy in the Japanese populace, in particular among the younger generation. The values of freedom and equality came to be championed as the way to establish democracy and were reflected strongly in the blueprint for reforming postwar education (Okada, 2012; Tsuchimochi, 1993; Cummings, 1980).

Numerous structural changes were proposed to transform the prewar education system. Among the most significant were the new Constitution and the newly enacted Fundamental Law of Education. Both stipulated equal opportunity of education as one primary goal of education. To realize this goal, educational discrimination against women was eliminated, thus providing equal opportunities for female participation in secondary and higher education. Under the influence of American thought, the so-called “6-3-3” structure of school system was rapidly introduced, reorganizing the Japanese system so that it would consist of six years of elementary, three years of lower secondary, and three years of upper secondary education. The first nine years of the new system (i.e., elementary and middle school) was mandated as both compulsory and free education (in the prewar system, middle school enrollment required tuition fees). This was an ambitious reform for a country that was suffering from an acute shortage of resources and a devastated infrastructure. It was a particularly heavy burden to establish the lower secondary school system as an additional part of compulsory education. Achieving universal access to lower secondary education for all would, however, become one fundamental reason behind the later egalitarianism of Japanese education. It is worth noting here that establishment of universal and comprehensive lower secondary education was a highly ambitious plan for the time, as most European countries still maintained the bipartite or tripartite system.

Upper secondary schools were also transformed from the prewar European-style bipartite or tripartite structure to an American-style high school system, one in which comprehensive high schools became the only upper secondary education institution available. Newly established high schools now provide both general and vocational education under the same blanket term—high school (*kōtōgakkō*), even though in some parts of Japan, general and vocational education was actually provided by separate schools. In the prewar period, many different types of secondary schools existed, each with its own name. Coeducation was achieved in high schools, too, even though in some parts of Japan, the separation between boys’ and girls’ schools remained somewhat unchanged.

Higher education underwent substantial reforms as well. Discrimination preventing women from entering university was abolished, and former tertiary education institutions became universities which could grant degrees (after obtaining Ministry of Education accreditation). In this way, the structure of higher education became simplified, consisting of just two types of institutions: universities and junior colleges.[2]

New Middle Schools

While the same name of “middle school” (*chūgakkō*) was simply carried over from the prewar system, the postwar middle school was established based on completely different premises: egalitarian ideas promulgated in the new Constitution and the Fundamental Law of Education. Incorporated into compulsory education, postwar middle schools immediately become free, public, comprehensive, coed, and community-based. All students, both boys and girls, over the age of 12 years old from the same school district could now attend the same middle school without taking entrance examinations.

These newly established middle schools came to be a driving force in Japanese educational egalitarianism, not only by providing universal access to lower secondary education, but also through two other unique features. First, most middle schools did not implement ability grouping among students as practiced in the United States. This was despite fact that U.S. middle schools or junior high schools served as the model (Cummings, 1980). Students in the same school learned the same curriculum despite the reality of diversity in their academic abilities. The curriculum content was standardized by the state, as defined in the national curriculum (Official Course of Study). It was expected that all students in middle schools would learn virtually the same material through the use of textbooks that were monitored by the Ministry of Education according to the national curriculum. This situation emerged because learning different contents from diverse curricula was believed to be discriminatory, even if students differed in actual ability. Such a belief was a product of a combination of a negative sentiment against the elitist and rigorous meritocratic selection in the prewar period and an obsession with egalitarian idealism that was introduced as part of the postwar reforms. Since this is a relatively unique feature of Japanese education, one which can be conceptualized as “antimeritocratic discrimination sentiment,” a deeper discussion of this normative dimension will be postponed until later in this article.

Second, the central government financially intervened in equalizing resource disparity among middle schools across different regions, although as community-based public schools, middle schools were and continue to be run independently by each municipal Board of Education. In particular, a national policy was enacted that evened out the previously large gaps in teachers’ salaries between municipalities with different financial resources. This policy covered elementary schools as well. In the prewar period, huge regional variations in elementary school teacher salaries were widespread. Richer regions could afford to pay higher salaries, thus enabling them to employ more fully credentialed teachers. Meanwhile, poorer regions were obliged to hire less qualified teachers (i.e., those with incomplete credentials). In contrast not only to the prewar past but also to the American postwar model, where financial differences among different school districts resulted from the different financial strength between municipalities, the Japanese government strived to minimize such gaps by evening out or leveling the quality of teachers (the same was true for elementary schools). By eliminating financial barriers that prevented poor municipalities from hiring fully qualified and experienced teachers, this state-led intervention revealed just how policymakers at the time viewed equality in

education for the larger social project of realizing democracy. This method of financial distribution reflects a crucial dimension of the Japanese premise of postwar educational egalitarianism, one which can be called “zone-based equality” (Kariya, 2013B, 2010A, 2010B). This concept will be discussed in greater detail further on in this article.

These changes had other effects as well. Lengthening compulsory schooling by three years meant upper secondary schools were more accessible to a larger number of students. Lacking ability groupings, which often functions as a device that cools down the educational aspirations of academically weaker students, more students only gained not access to but also began to aspire to advance to upper secondary education. As Japan’s economy grew and family income expanded in its wake, more middle school graduates were able to attend high school, thanks to their increased family income sufficient to pay tuitions fees and cover foregone earnings that could be lost by having three more years of schooling in upper secondary schools. As a result of all these factors, high school enrollment rates increased substantially and rapidly starting in the late 1950s, the moment when the Japanese economy entered the so-called rapid growth era. This expansion is shown in Figure 1. Such a rapid expansion of upper secondary education contributed not only to equalizing opportunity of education but also to enhancing student chances for social mobility. Those with a high school diploma or a higher degree were awarded jobs in the rapidly growing “modern” sector (typically manufacturing), which provided more secure and higher-income jobs than agriculture. This large-scale occupational mobility contributed to the equalization of income disparity during the 1960s and 1970s (Kagawa et al., 2014).

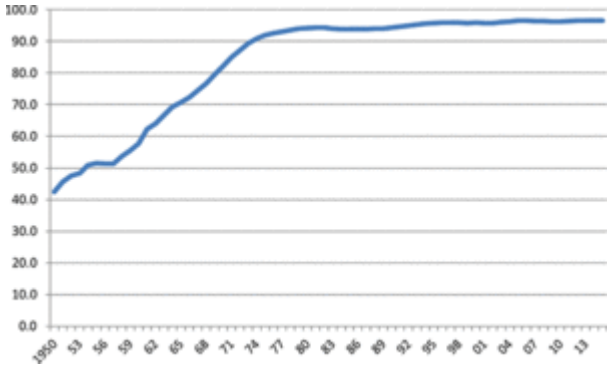

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Figure 1. Enrolment rate of senior high school

Source: MEXT, School Basic Survey, each year.

Common school experiences in middle school also facilitated a shared sense of how society was constituted. Spending adolescent years in the same school with peer students from various socioeconomic origins gave Japanese students a strong awareness that society consisted of a population of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. As mentioned previously, teachers in middle schools strived to avoid separating students according to their academic ability, ensuring students shared in a highly standardized and uniform school experience. Middle school as a microcosm of Japanese society, therefore, succeeded in inculcating students with the values of cooperation and collaboration among peers through a range of academic and extracurricular activities (Fukuzawa & LeTendre, 2001; LeTendre & Rohlen, 2000). Such extracurricular classroom activities—including cleaning classrooms, serving school lunch,

and participating in sports and culture clubs—taught students how to work together in a society, despite the fact that students were varied and diverse in terms of their social background, academic achievement, and destined future careers. Common school experiences thus contributed to creating a common social foundation on which Japanese society became harmonized, and people came to respect the value of equality (Cummings, 1980).

In spite of these common school life experiences, middle schools also become one primary site where students were and still are differentiated into different careers after compulsory education. In the last year of middle school, each student has to make a decision whether or not to move on to senior high school. In the context of the clear hierarchical structure of high schools discussed earlier, it matters greatly for students' future career which high school they chose to enter (and can enter according to their entrance exam results). Mock exams to prepare for the entrance exams are taken in middle school, and the results let students know the likelihood that they can successfully pass the entrance exam for a particular chosen high school. Repeated mock exams result in making students and peers increasingly aware of how good they are in academic subjects, and more specifically how well they rank versus other students. Facilitating this, test scores were (and still are) calculated statistically as standardized deviations called *hensachi*, indicating the relative position of a student within the same school district. The *hensachi*, or the standardized scores of mock exams, emerged as a clear one-dimensional scale of meritocratic selection (Kariya & Rosenbaum, 1987). Equipped with this more scientifically sophisticated tool (i.e., a rigorous application of statistical methods to accurately calculate students' likelihood of success on entrance examinations), a more objectivized, exam-driven education in postwar Japan played a greater role in screening young people into stratified society, claiming to do so with more validity and legitimacy as compared with the prewar period (Kariya, 1995; Dore & Kariya, 2006). One result of this was that the validity and legitimacy of a one-dimensional meritocratic scale came to be widely accepted throughout the society, despite the fact that students' academic achievement remained significantly influenced by their family background through economic, cultural, and social capital embedded in the family (Kariya, 1995).

High School

Senior high schools were reestablished as upper secondary schools. Many prewar secondary schools, such as middle schools, women's higher schools, and vocational schools, came to be reorganized as new high schools. That is, the differentiated secondary education in the prewar system was abolished, restructured, and integrated, incorporating all upper secondary school into institutions which were called simply "high schools." While this institutional integration of secondary education rewrote the elitist nature of high schools and contributed to rapidly increasing the enrollment rate, the prewar legacy of hierarchical structure among schools nevertheless endured even after the name change of these schools. Former boys' middle schools, in particular, were often

placed at the top of the new hierarchy that formed in the postwar period. As such, the entrance examination for these schools remained competitive, whereas newly established schools, such as former women's schools and vocational institutions, came to be relegated to the middle or lower positions of the hierarchy.

In this way, the combined influence of the postwar ideas of equality in education and the prewar legacy of school hierarchy produced an acute tension in education and came to characterize the nature of equality in Japanese education. This can be called the double standard of equality, which will be discussed in greater detail in the following sections.

Responding to increasing demand for high school education, on the one hand, more opportunities were provided by establishing more new high schools. It was in this way that the government strived to realize equality of education at the upper secondary stage. As shown earlier in Figure 1, the enrollment rate for senior high school expanded rapidly during the 1960s–1970s.

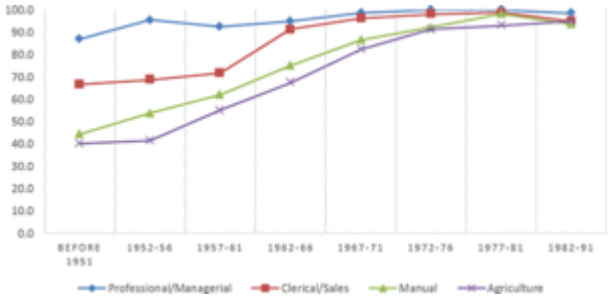

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Figure 2. Change in the ratio of holders of a high school diploma or above disaggregated by parental occupation and year of entrance to high school

Source: Kariya (2013A).

Such a rapid expansion of high school education also contributed to equalizing opportunities to students from different family backgrounds, as indicated in Figure 2. In the 1960s, there were still large differentials in enrollment rates among students reflecting different family background (in this case, represented by the fathers' occupations): higher enrollment rates for students whose fathers held professional or managerial jobs, and lower rates for those whose fathers held blue collar jobs or were farmers. From the 1970s through the 1980s, however, these gaps were reduced as overall enrollment rates increased to over 90% (Kariya, 2013A). Thus, over the first stage of this era of a double standard of equality, i.e., in the time when the postwar ideas of equality in education worked with the prewar legacy of school hierarchy, the expansion of high school education opportunities served to reduce inequalities in access to upper secondary education among students from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

On the other hand, there persisted what might be called the "other side" of the double standard of equality: Meritocratic selection into differently ranked high schools functioned as a sorting device, pushing students into "tracking"-like ability groupings. These "tracks" were not within an individual school. Each school was a cohesive unit but "tracked" in the larger tracked field of institutions. That is, individual schools were composed of academically differentiated students almost solely according to the entrance exam results. Although admissions decisions were nominally made primarily based on the

results of students' entrance examinations, there was a clear correlation between students' academic achievement and their family background: The higher their socioeconomic background, the more likely students were to succeed in entrance examinations leading to admission into higher-ranked high schools (Aramaki, 2016; Kariya, 2011).

Despite this correlation, the consequences of this differentiation were viewed as defensible and socially accepted as long as the public maintained a strong faith in meritocracy. While competition solely based on test scores was often criticized, inequality among students from different family backgrounds in this differentiation was rarely problematized in Japan, even by progressive commentators. The primary reason for this was that it was feared that such criticisms could make it publically visible that students from disadvantaged families tend to perform poorly on the exams, and such public visibility could make them feel inferior. In other words, to avoid the risk that students would come to have a sense of superiority or inferiority, one which would correlate with family background, policymakers as well as progressive educators refused to touch this sensitive issue (Kariya, 1995, 2013a).

As a product of the double standard of equality, the combined effect of universal access to upper secondary education and the differentiation of students into the hierarchy of high schools worked together in shaping equality and inequality in Japan's educational system. Provision of upper secondary education for virtually all students who finished middle school ensured an adequate supply of well-trained workers for the Japanese economy, particularly important for the high economic growth era. This was the time when postwar baby boomers were finishing compulsory education. The majority of them were able to enjoy the rapidly expanding opportunities to participate in high school education. Those from agricultural background in particular, the majority of whom had previously completed only compulsory education, now obtained more stable and higher-wage jobs in the modern sector. This was in small part a benefit of having upper secondary education certificates obtained from high schools (Kariya, 2013a). In this way, equality in education of a certain type contributed to facilitating social mobility, reducing income gaps, stabilizing employment, and equalizing Japanese society from roughly the 1960s through the 1980s (Kagawa et al., 2014; Cummings, 1980).

At the same time, the meritocratic selection of students into the hierarchy of high schools functioned as a sorting device that has enabled upper secondary education to be run more efficiently. In other words, the hierarchy functioned in much the same way as ability grouping arrangements (i.e., tracking or streaming) do in other countries: producing an academically homogeneous student body leading to more efficient institutions, albeit this student body was homogenous *within* each school. The hierarchy of high schools encouraged students to work hard in middle school in order to pass the entrance examinations for higher scores and thus be admitted to a higher-ranking school than their peers. The result of the selection reflected, to some extent, inequality in education as influenced by students' socioeconomic status. However, as long as test scores were perceived to be primarily the product of individual students' hard work (effort) in school,

and policymakers and educators hesitated to make visible the fact that students' academic achievement was influenced by their family background, the selection would come to be regarded as meritocratic and thus legitimate (Kariya, 1995). Public trust in educational meritocracy implemented through strict exam-based school admissions thus served to conceal and legitimatize educational inequality.

Tertiary Education

The postwar reforms did not spare tertiary education, a system that was remarkably elitist in the prewar period: Women were excluded altogether from university education, and enrollment rates of the same age cohort was less than 5% (MEXT, 1971). The first effort to change the system focused on increasing the number of tertiary education institutions with the distinction of university. This was accomplished by transforming former higher schools and tertiary vocational schools into universities, resulting in an almost fourfold increase in the number of universities from 48 in 1944 to 201 in 1950. This reform also simplified the structure of tertiary education, changing it from a complex and diverse field into one consisting of two types of institutions: four-year universities and two-year junior colleges. Yet, this new structure did not directly address inequality. For example, gender inequality persisted, as the majority of female students enrolled in two-year colleges, while male students were more likely to attend four-year institutions. Such gender gaps persisted even through the 2000s, albeit in a changed form (Ishida, 2007).

Enrollment rates at university and junior colleges rapidly expanded as Japan's economy entered the high-growth era which enabled both government spending and household income to support more higher education. After the first expansion push right after the war, a second one occurred during the 1960s. This one was driven by the increase in newly established private institutions or the expansion in size of already established private universities. As a result, private institutions came to dominate the total share of university education, both in terms of the number of institutions and the share of total students, as shown in Figure 3. This "privatization" in higher education has long shaped the nature of disparities in accessing higher education in Japan.

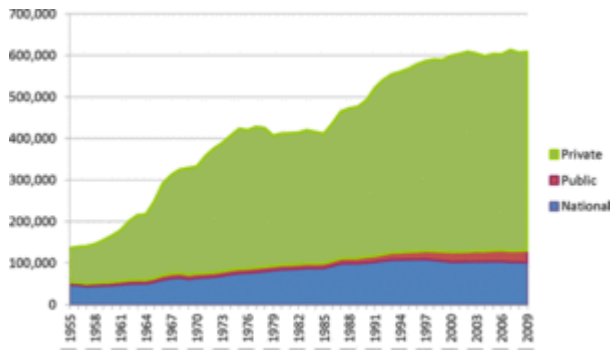

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Figure 3. Trend of the number of incoming students in 4 year university

Higher education in Japan has never been free: Both public (mostly national) and private institutions have charged tuition fees and continue to do so. The fees for private universities have traditionally been approximately two or three times higher than for public institutions. As in other countries, the reason is that most private institutions, given their weak financial foundations, are dependent on student tuitions fees for sustenance. Direct government financial support for students was also insufficient. Accordingly, the income level of students' households has been the primary factor determining an individual's access to university education. This remained true even when university enrollment rates topped 50% in the first decade of the 2000s (Yano, 2015).

As with senior high schools, universities and junior colleges existed in a clear hierarchy. Institutions were differentiated based on students' exam scores and institutional prestige carried over from the prewar era. To be admitted to highly prestigious and selective universities, higher entrance examinations scores were required, but these significantly correlated with a student's family background, not only in terms of economic capital, but also in terms of social and/or cultural capital (Aramaki, 2016; Kariya, 2011). An institution's position in the hierarchy also impacted on and differentiated graduates' occupational careers. Graduates from highly prestigious and selective universities were more likely to find more stable and well-paid employment, including jobs in large-sized firms, public offices, or professional careers (Kariya, 2010B; Ono, 2004; Ishida, 1993). The hierarchical structure thus operated as a sorting mechanism, one through which inequality in education was transformed into disparity in life chances among students. But one needs to keep in mind this was all reinforced by persistent and intractable influences of students' family background. Even after further expansion of higher education was achieved during the first decade of the 2000s, students' family background continued to be the major force impacting on their life chances through inequality in education.

Depictions of Equality and Inequality in Japanese Education: Objective and Subjective

Facts of Disparities in Educational Attainment

Given the egalitarian and meritocratic nature of postwar education, opportunities to attend upper secondary and tertiary education have expanded rapidly in Japan, even though this has occurred through maintenance of the hierarchical structure of schools and universities. The result is that more people have been given chances to enter higher education. Nevertheless, disparities in educational attainment related to family background have remained stable rather than contracting, persisting without drastic change even across the period of expansion of higher education beginning in the 1990s. Research shows that students from families with fathers having professional/managerial jobs, as well as those with highly educated parents, are more likely to attain higher education credentials (bachelor's degrees or above) as compared with others (Ishida, 2007; cf. Aramaki, 2016; Kondo & Furuta, 2009). Research provides several explanations for causality of such persistent educational inequality: Some argue that economic capital (i.e., family income) still either has a direct influence on university attendance by affecting a family's ability to afford tuition fees (especially for private institutions) or exerts indirect effects by determining whether the family can pay for private tutorials (i.e., shadow education) that enhance children's academic achievement, while others argue that a family's cultural and social capital influences children's academic achievement through their learning in varied ways (e.g., providing family environments that encourage children to work diligently, cultural resources transformable into higher academic achievement, and incentives to aspire to attain higher education).[3]

Not only have educational attainment levels (as indicated by individuals' final level of education) been influenced by individuals' family backgrounds, but entrance into different rank positions in the hierarchical structure of high schools and universities has also been influenced. Aramaki (2016), for instance, recently explored the effects of family background on ranking positions of senior high schools entered. He found that students with fathers holding university degrees and/or those with professional/managerial occupations are more likely to attend the highest-ranked high schools. Likewise, the combination of these factors also positively impacts on chances to attend higher ranked universities (Aramaki, 2016), while Fujihara and Ishida (2016) find that the gap between those with fathers having only a high school education and those with fathers having a university education has widened in recent years.

Subjective Sentiment Against "Meritocratic Discrimination"

While the previous section addresses factual or objective depictions of Japanese education, to fully understand the nature of issues surrounding inequality in Japan's education, it is important and necessary to also draw attention to the more subjective or normative dimension as well: the concept of "meritocratic discrimination" (Kariya, 1995,

2013A). This idea was constructed, was widely dispersed, and came to be shared among most Japanese educators during the postwar period.

In the American and British context, the concept of “discrimination” in English, for example, does not signify differential treatment derived from observed differences in individual ability or achievement. Rather, it pertains to unjustly differentiated treatment based not on qualities of the individual, but instead on social categories such as class, race/ethnicity, gender, and place of birth.

In contrast to this, Japanese educators in the postwar period were strongly influenced by a way of thinking that viewed the ranking of children in terms of ability and achievement as a serious educational problem. This was partially a negative reaction against the severe exam-based school selection in the prewar system. It was also a product of the postwar democratic reforms taking place in Japanese education. Although it may be difficult for some non-Japanese readers to grasp, Japanese teachers tended to perceive *any* attempt to treat students differently according to their ability or achievement as “meritocratic discrimination” (*nōryokushugiteki sabetsu*) or “discriminatory/selective education” (*sabetsu-senbatsu kyō’iku*) (Kariya, 2013A). The only exceptions here were for disabled students. Behind this idea was a widely accepted consensus among most people (including most teachers) that Japanese society was obsessed with educational credentials, in which ranking inevitably occurred and in which the sorting of students reflected performance on tests and *hensachi* scores, leading to the assignment of students in a highly visibly manner into a hierarchical structure of schools. According to these discourses, meritocratic discrimination, going along with ranking and treating students differently according to their academic achievement, was perceived to make academically poor students feel inferior to others, leading them to commit acts of bullying, delinquency, and other related problems.

Another premise supporting this sentiment of antimeritocratic discrimination was the normative aspect of an emphasis on student effort. Working hard in school was (and still is) believed to be more important for a student’s success in school than innate ability. In other words, most Japanese teachers supported (and continue to support) the idea that although students may differ in innate ability, hard work, and diligence could overcome whatever innate ability factors might exist. Japanese teachers, therefore, were unwilling to treat students differently, believing that all students are capable of achieving at a high level academically if students made sufficient efforts in a setting in which undifferentiated teaching was given “equally” in the classroom.

Backed by this sentiment of antimeritocratic discrimination, Japanese teachers avoided introducing ability grouping in secondary schools, despite the fact that they reluctantly accepted the exam-based allocation of students into the hierarchical structure of high schools. Applying the same treatment to all students, without isolating any of them from the mainstream, was viewed as “equal education,” i.e., one in which no one would feel they were being discriminated against. This understanding contrasts sharply with a

common understanding of equality in education among other countries, where it is believed that equality in education is achieved by differentiating or individualizing teaching and learning settings according to students' specific learning needs.

Zone-Based Equality

In terms of the aforementioned financial equalization in education, in which resource disparities among elementary and middle schools across different regions are equalized, another unique feature of the Japanese educational egalitarianism can be conceptualized here as "zone-based equality" (*men no byōdō* in Japanese) (Kariya, 2009, 2010A, 2013B). Zone-based equality is an egalitarian idea underpinning Japanese education funding that seeks to equalize resources allocated among different geographical administrative units like prefectures, cities, school districts, and schools (note that this applies primarily to funding for compulsory education).

This conception of equality stands in sharp contrast with the American idea of individually based equality. In the United States, educational funding most often takes the form of per-student or per-head schemes. These schemes seek to equalize resources among individual students. Individuals are the basic unit. Such individual-based equality approaches to educational funding appear to mesh well with the individualistic approach in teaching that initially accepts individual differences in abilities (e.g., IQ) and attributes (e.g., gender, race, and class). Innate abilities and attributes are thought to combine to differentiate students in terms of their academic achievement. Individually appropriate but differentiated approaches are therefore utilized to equalize outcomes of academic achievement among students. Ability tracking and individualized learning and instruction are clear examples of this approach.

In contrast, a zone-based equality approach strives to prevent differences among individual students within the same "zone." It seeks to equalize educational conditions and settings on the basis of collective units such as prefectures, cities, school districts, schools, and classrooms. Such uniformity in educational conditions based on collective units is also believed to prevent making individuals' differences in ability and attributes overtly visible, which conforms to the sentiment of antimeritocratic discrimination. Thus, the Japanese scheme of resource allocation and the group-based, rather than individual-based, teaching and learning methods eventually come to work together under this concept of zone-based equality. The end result was a highly progressive approach to resource allocation, which transfers resources from richer to poorer regions, as well as collaborative, though less individualistic, more collectivistic learning environments (Kariya, 2013B).

The Changing Mechanisms of Inequality in Japanese Education Under the “Relaxed Education” Reforms

Reforms in the 1990s and New Factors Leading to Increasing Educational Inequality

One may contend that the form and the extent of inequality in education can be influenced by changes in income distribution among households (disparities in families’ economic capital) or those in composition of parental education and/or occupations (cultural and/or social capital in a family) across any given society. These are, in a sense, external factors impacting on how inequality in education transforms over time. Since the burst of the “bubble economy” in the early 1990s, Japanese society has certainly experienced changing external factors, leading to the aggravation of income equality and increasingly unstable jobs, even while the parental education level of students has continuously increased. These changes in external factors, with the exception of parental education, may have exacerbated educational inequalities.

However great the impacts of changes in these external factors may be, to understand the nature of problems in inequality in Japanese education, it is important to distinguish between internal and external dimensions. Despite the fact that internal and external factors often mutually interact to produce and reproduce social inequality in education, this section sheds light on the endogenous mechanisms operating inside of education—an aspect of education that is often overlooked by social science researchers.

Here education reforms since the 1990s are worth looking at closely because these reforms were aimed at producing substantial, even fundamental, change in the basic approach to pedagogy and curricula, as well as in “school choice.” One of the main goals of these reforms was to transform Japanese education in ways that left behind the “catching up with the West” paradigm of education in the previous century. According to the reformers in the late 1980s, Japanese education had taken shape in the period of catching up with the West and thus had overemphasized a single-minded, brutally efficient pursuit of instilling knowledge imported from advanced, mostly “Western,” countries into the minds of Japanese students. In this frame, the reforms aimed to reestablish education that would nurture the types of skills and knowledge purportedly necessary for the 21st century. Foremost among these were problem-solving and critical thinking skills, both of which were purported to have been lacking in catching-up style education. This set of ideas crystallized into the so-called “*yutori kyōiku*” reforms (in English this is translated as “relaxed education”; see Kariya, 2013A). These pedagogical reforms were to unfold alongside “neoliberal” structural reforms in the 1990s,

exemplified, for example, by school choice policies, although different in many ways both approaches emphasized the importance of the individuality of learners.

Indeed, the importance of individuality came to the forefront of Japanese education during the 1990s and 2000s. At the classroom level, new pedagogies respecting students' individual interests and motivation for learning rolled out in the 1990s were introduced under the banner of a policy slogan of "*atarashii-gakuryoku-kan*" (the new definition of a student's academic achievement), a phrase that began to enter the public imagination in the late 1980s. This approach emphasized the importance of students' self-learning, rather than simply knowledge-cramming. This approach became one of the underpinning ideas launched under the curricular reforms of "*yutori-kyoiku*" that came to be fully implemented from the early 2000s.

The relaxed education reforms specifically targeted drastic changes in curriculum and instruction. To give students more "room to grow" (*yutori*, in Japanese), the reforms reduced the number of days in school per year (by taking off all Saturdays), whittling away about 30% of textbook content, and introducing experiential learning in the form of *sogoteki-na-gakushu-no-jikan*, or integrated learning classes. These relaxed education reforms were implemented in public schools from elementary to upper secondary level, while private schools often maintained their own curricula. Some of the private schools even rejected the change in number of school days, most likely an attempt to give their students extra time to master textbook content.

These "relaxed education" reforms were respected and accepted largely by the public when they were first proposed. However, early problems with implementation showed that the bold reforms had been launched without sufficient preparation and amidst much uncertainty. One major reason for this was lack of investment of sufficient resources. For example, the individualized and personalized learning reforms envisaged requiring smaller class sizes to allow teachers more time to pay attention to the individual needs of students. The large class sizes in Japanese schools (the average number of students in a class was 28.7 in elementary school, and 34.2 in middle school in 2002, which are much larger than the average among the OECD countries) remained unchanged, however, because the government did not invest enough to increase school teaching staff. Nor were teachers given sufficient resources for learning the new teaching skills (e.g., in-service training), meaning that the reforms only made teachers busier than before.

Bright Flight

These reforms also brought about several other internal changes within education. First, the flight of middle class students from public to private schools took place. This phenomenon was particularly pronounced in large cities. Parents who distrusted the relaxed education reforms decided to send their children to private schools, especially those combining lower and upper secondary schools. As mentioned previously, private schools often did not change their curricula or reduce the number of school days. Or if

they did participate in the reduction, often the level was not to the same degree as public schools. Worrying about the possible negative impact of the new curriculum and pedagogy on their children's university entrance examination performance, parents who could afford private school tuition tended to take their children out of public schools. Six-year private secondary schools often maintained the traditional curricula and pedagogies, which resulted in perceived advantages for students in university entrance examination preparation, which—in turn—was perceived to result in a greater likelihood of students in those schools entering higher-ranked universities. Bright, middle class children, particularly in big cities like Tokyo, thus began to take flight from public schools. Middle class parents' distrust of the feasibility of the relaxed education reforms thus initiated a "bright flight" from public middle schools (Kariya, 2011; Kariya & Rosenbaum, 1999). This widened the divide between private and public secondary schools in terms of student composition and expanded educational inequality, both in terms of family background and cognitive abilities (Kataoka, 2009). This bright flight also led to the weakening of common school experiences in public middle school that formerly took place. This was thus one of the internal factors (i.e., within education rather than the wider society) that were facilitated by the relaxed education reforms, one which contributed to increased disparities in education.

The Incentive Divide

A second mechanism through which the relaxed education reforms increased educational inequality was the impacts they had on students' incentives to learn. The experiential learning approach introduced as one part of reforms aimed to give individual students more freedom and choices in respect of what and how they would learn. It placed a major new emphasis on students' self-motivation for learning, and it was believed that more freedom would lead to higher motivation and more commitment. Students' active commitment to such learning, however, differed according to their family background, much more than in conventional learning settings. Research finds that students from families having more cultural resources are more likely to commit to classroom activities even after controlling for their conventional academic achievements (Kariya & Shimizu, 2004). This was partly due to the greater complexity of goal-setting within experiential learning classrooms. Students poorly resourced with cultural capital were more likely to find it difficult to set their own goals for learning and thus more easily lose an inherent incentive to learn. This is in part because these students tended to lack basic academic skills they would have obtained in conventional textbook-based classes (Kariya & Shimizu, 2004). Academically weaker students who lacked sufficient cultural resources, often coming from disadvantaged family backgrounds, were more likely to face difficulties in motivating themselves in more relaxed learning situations, because they were less likely to find meaningfulness in self-directed learning under less guided and structured teaching settings. Tobishima (2016) analyzes the Japanese data for PISA 2009 and finds that scores for subareas in language tests that need more thinking skills were

more strongly influenced by students' family background than the score of more basic reading skills. These results suggest that the academic ability required within the new pedagogies is more likely to be impacted by students' family background.

Another primary goal of the relaxed education reforms was to reduce exam pressure on students. To achieve this goal, MEXT encouraged local boards of education to adopt more multidimensional assessments of students during the high school admissions process. In other words, local boards were encouraged to base admissions not only on academic criteria, but also on other aptitudes and aspects of students including extracurricular activities, behavioral and attitudinal characteristics, and personality. Adopting more multidimensional assessments may have reduced the pressures of examinations, but it also made the selection criteria more complicated and ambiguous than test scores. Students who were not seeking to gain admission for higher-ranked schools, in particular, lost clear incentives to work hard in school because working hard was the obvious and only means to improve their test scores in entrance examinations, but this priority became more ambiguous in its effectiveness and expected returns due to the admissions reforms. As mentioned earlier, those students who lost clear incentives were more likely to come from disadvantaged families. Thus, the "incentive divide" was exacerbated by the relaxed education reforms (Kariya, 2013A; Kariya & Rosenbaum, 2003). Such an incentive divide emerged as another internal factor within education that contributed to shaping or exacerbating inequalities in education.

Japan's "Lost Decades" and Increasing Disparities in Education

Recent Changes in Economy and Financial Reforms

In the early 2000s income disparities in Japan progressively expanded and instability in employment intensified even further. Recently, such problems have become too visible to be denied. Aiming to make the labor market more fluid and to reduce labor costs in a bid to maintain Japan's economic competitiveness, the Japanese government's neoliberal reforms adopted several deregulation policies related to employment. Most prominent among these was allowing employers across a wide range of industries to hire nonregular workers such as short-term contract workers and part-timers. One result was increased income disparities between workers, largely between those who were in stable jobs and those who were not. The emergence of disparities in income and the increasing number of workers in insecure employment served to change the visibility and level of public concern about inequality in the first decade of the 2000s. Put simply, the myth of "all middle class society" had now disappeared.

Simultaneously, the neoliberal reforms also targeted the centralized and uniform education system, which was regarded as an impediment to freedom and efficiency in education. Particularly, fiscal decentralization for compulsory education was put on the discussion table for policy changes as a part of Prime Minister Koizumi's structural reform plans. In 2004, the government decided on a plan to transfer tax-collecting authority worth three trillion yen to local governments and cut the same amount of subsidies to offset the revenue loss. Out of the three trillion yen, about 0.85 trillion yen in subsidies for elementary and middle school teachers' salaries from MEXT were targeted for transfer. MEXT was not willing to adopt this policy, but finally, in December 2005, the government decided to transfer this amount to local governments by reducing the central government's rate of support from 50% to 33% of teachers' salaries in compulsory education (Kariya, 2013B, 2010A).

Note that there was (and still is) a serious problem of national and local government debts following the bursting of the asset "bubble." This necessitated severe budget cutting in order to balance the national budget. While local governments have been given more discretion to decide how much should be paid for compulsory education under the Koizumi reforms, financially poorer regions facing budget shortfalls were forced to cut their budget for teacher salaries. This was done by reducing the number of full-time tenured teachers and replacing them with nontenured, fixed-year teachers and/or part-time lecturers. It has not yet been clearly determined empirically how the decentralization financial reforms have impacted on inequalities in education. Nonetheless, it is quite likely that the former egalitarian subsidy system for compulsory education is at risk of disappearing all together. If this proves to be the case, fiscal decentralization in compulsory education will become another factor internal to education that exacerbates educational inequality.

Recognizing Educational Inequality: Recent Acknowledgments by the Japanese Government

As public concerns about general social inequality have grown over the past two decades, MEXT is increasingly forced to directly and explicitly address the issue of educational inequality. That is, the problem no longer remains unacknowledged as it was in the past. When Japan's Democratic Party (JDP) came to power in 2008 and displaced the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), the new government launched explicit policies aimed at mitigating inequalities in the society. For example, the government decided to abolish tuitions fees for public senior high schools. The JDP government also advanced a policy to reduce class size in elementary and middle schools. However, such policies were halted when the government shifted back to the LDP in 2012.

Reacting to the criticisms of the relaxed education reforms, MEXT has also revised the national curricula and decided to reintroduce textbook content previously expunged during the outset of the relaxed education reforms. The government has also loosened the school day policy: Now schools can increase the number of school days per year if needed

to cover the increased textbook content presented in the new national curricula. Through these new policies, the government, which now has officially acknowledged the existence of educational inequality as a policy issue, has emphasized the importance of conventional student academic achievement as well as new cognitive skills that are purportedly necessary for the globalized 21st-century “knowledge economy.” It is too early to scrutinize how these new policies have changed inequality in education in Japan, but there is no doubt that the issues of inequality in education can now no longer been ignored, hidden, and avoided within national policy debates on education policy.

Despite the reality of a highly constrained financial situation under the current situation of a huge national debt (almost twice as large as Japan’s GDP), which should restrict governmental policy choices, by providing preschool education of quality for all, the government should prioritize provision for younger-aged children in economically and culturally poor families, and increasing financial aid for economically disadvantaged students to go to university. At very least, excessively idealistic reforms aimed at achieving romanticized individualization in education should be avoided unless sufficient investments in education can be made. Hence, future research needs to keep the analytical focus on how individualization education reforms will increase disparities in students’ learning outcomes, if they really attain their purported goals (e.g., fostering creative and autonomous individuals), and how and to what extent the government will improve investment in public education as a means of reducing disparities.

Conclusion

The Japanese path to modernization, both in society as a whole and in education, has given rise to various types of educational inequality. Some of these forms exist in other advanced societies, but others are unique to Japan. The two stages of modernization, one beginning from the Meiji Restoration, and the other restarting from the end of the World War II, transformed Japanese society and education in distinct ways from preceding periods. The first step of modernization, marked by the establishment of a modern education system, paved the way to a meritocracy leading to jobs in the modern sector of industries and occupations. The Japanese modern education system, as in other advanced societies, played a great role as a mechanism for social mobility. But in the Japanese case it came to feature selection through severe entrance examinations and hierarchically structured secondary and tertiary education institutions. In a sense, one can say that the general mindset placing a high value on meritocracy was established in this first phase of modernization. The arrangement worked successfully to produce a well-trained workforce to “catch up” with the advanced Western nations, even while it failed—in part—to nurture elites and citizens who obtained critical and independent thinking skills, resulting in the rush into militarism and fanatic nationalism, and finally ending with the devastation of war (Shibata, 2005; Khan, 1998; United States Education Mission to Japan, 1946).

Japan’s defeat in World War II triggered a second step in the modernization of Japan, one in which American democracy became the premise on which Japanese society was to be reestablished. In this second phase of modernization, the conception of equal opportunities of education was strongly emphasized in the design of the reestablished education system, one always aimed foremost at realizing democracy. Under the more simplified and less elitist system, opportunities for upper secondary and tertiary education expanded rapidly, driven by a general mindset favoring meritocracy among the Japanese populace. A double standard of equality, a combined product mixing the postwar ideas of equality in education and the prewar legacy of school hierarchy, was at works here to expand opportunities for secondary and tertiary education, even while maintaining the severe exam-based selection processes within an overall hierarchy of institutions. With these expanded higher education opportunities, education contributed to some degree to equalizing society as a whole over the 1960s and 1970s. But the double standard of equality also maintained the elitist features of Japan’s education, resulting in continuity of educational inequality influenced by student family background and correlated to their future life chances.

Sentiments against of meritocratic discrimination and the conception of zone-based equality worked together to forge a uniquely Japanese way of pursuing educational equality. In compulsory education, applying the same treatment in teaching and learning settings to all students was perceived to be an equal education. This was backed up with the premise of zone-based equality, which facilitated the standardization of nearly all features of education. Without exposing individual differences in ability among students, those practices to some extent achieved the leveling off of disparities in education. These two characteristics of Japan’s educational egalitarianism in fact contributed to reducing disparities in student academic achievement between different geographical regions (Kariya, 2009, 2013b), and possibly among individual students. Together they produced and maintained, however, a centralized education system and a uniform approach to education—a setup that became criticized harshly from the 1990s onward.

The late 1980s witnessed a drastic change in the mindset of the Japanese people, including policymakers: They recognized and were confident that Japan had completed “catch-up” with the advanced Western countries. This shift led the discussions of education reforms emphasizing the individuality of students and importance of students’ own choice, in order to overcome the perceived deficits of Japan’s educational past: centralization, uniformity, knowledge-cramming, exam-centered-education, and so on. Crystallizing in the reforms of “relaxed education,” decentralization of education administration, and school-choice policy, the policy shift also created new internal factors increasing social inequality in education, including bright flight, incentive divide, and the possible expansion of financial disparities between regions. Thus, those reforms purported to throw off the yoke of the “catch-up” style education, which had once been very successful in the first and second phases of modernization, have now produced unintended results in terms of educational equality.

Japan, as one major non-Western country and a latecomer to modernization, has energetically strived to modernize itself. The modernization of education played a preeminent role in modernizing the society as a whole. The modern education system created a visible social ladder for social mobility, which strengthened the ideology of meritocracy. As with other latecomers to modernization, Japan represented a typical case of a “credential society” suffering from the “diploma disease” (Dore, 1976). As Dore analyzed, in such countries equality in education tends to be prioritized much less than other modernization projects, such as economic growth or building a strong military. The postwar idealism toward democracy, however, pushed Japan to achieve the goal of equality in educational opportunities even given the limited resources. This was successful, at least to some extent, in contributing to economic growth as well as in reducing gaps in household income. The Japanese case, in this sense, suggests that democracy and meritocracy could work together under certain conditions, in particular within a framework of economic and education nationalism, where the primary concerns are areas within the purview of the nation-state. Put differently, the Japanese approach seems to have worked towards both ends in an era prior to the advent of globalization.

Yet clearly Japan now finds it difficult to promote equality in education in the current era of globalization. Japan’s trials in adapting its education system to changes wrought by globalization is an excellent window to view how well-intended reforms can backfire and produce unintended results, in particular in expanding inequality in education. Importantly, this article has attempted to highlight how these expansions can arise through factors internal to education, e.g., curricular and pedagogical reforms. These then combine with external factors in the larger society, e.g., increasing income disparities and unstable employment. Here one can find it is easy to idealize the move beyond a “catch-up style” of education, but it is very difficult to realize in practice. Japan’s experiences can show us both success and failure in education, but on a deeper level it also reveals how contradictory the expected roles that education is tasked with can be to reconcile in practice. The Japanese case is thus one that makes education’s enduring tensions most visible.

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Notes:

(1.) 1919 was the year when the University Order was implemented by which the government accredited former postsecondary special schools as universities.

(2.) In 1961, the simplified system became somewhat more multifaceted by adding technical colleges and then again in 1976 by adding upper secondary vocational schools.

(3.) More recent research has discovered a new trend: The increasing availability of government loans enables more students from lower-income families to attend private universities due to the expansion of the number of these private institutions, thus decreasing the gap in access to university education between those from middle-income and lower-income families (Furuta, 2006).

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