

# 日本の公立学校について

## － 認識と可能性 －

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### A brief overview of Japan's public schools: Perceptions and possibilities

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#### I. Introduction

Despite the fact Japanese education has some notable successes regarding international academic performance comparisons, it finds itself under considerable media scrutiny. Some of the criticisms stem from what can fairly be described as social problems such as teen suicide. One reason Japan's education system tends to get blamed for such failings is they take an extensive role in a child's life, sometimes making rules that extend outside the purview of school grounds and academia. With problems such as school refusal and hikkikomori (shut-ins) rising, and the concurrent rise of the internet, a number of educational alternatives are emerging.

The international and domestic media scrutinizes Japan's educational system. In *Shutting Out the Sun*, Zielenziger (2006) explored a number of societal and educational problems including hikkikomori, school refusal. Yuichi Hattori, who has worked with many such youth, diagnoses that these recluses have abandoned their own will and innate emotions and "suppress their natural identities" (p. 72). Hattori blames the education system which "emphasizes rote learning over the development of critical thinking skills" and continues to explain "there is little room for the deviant, someone who might "cause trouble" by expressing his own creative flair."

Likewise, media have published critiques such as What's Wrong With Japanese Education (no author, 2012) while the Huffington Post online newspaper published an article more provocatively entitled, "Japan's education disaster" (Uloop, 2015) describing the author's experience in Japanese schools and his opinion that students suffer from excessive stress. Such perceptions are not uncommon. Moreover, there are a number of youth-related problems in Japan that garner headlines: bullying, teen prostitution, teen suicide, an obsession with exams, or even a lack of discipline. Osaki Tomohiro, for example, explains that Japan is reverting to educational dictates that demand "unquestioning devotion to the Emperor" (2017). While some criticisms such as teen prostitution appear to be societal problems and thus outside the purview of the schools, a great deal of the responsibility for societal failings falls on Japan's public schools for a number of reasons.

More so than other countries, decisions made by individual schools exerts a great deal of control over students' lives. School hours are long and homework considerable both during the school year and during vacations. Moreover, school rules often extend into home life. For example, schools may forbid kids from leaving their homes before 9am or 10am during summer vacation; schools may demand kids wear hard helmets walking to and from school; and schools may even monitor youth after school hours off school grounds. Chris Weller (2017) noted that 57% of Tokyo schools demand students prove that their hair color is natural by showing their hair roots on demand. As the arbiters of childhood, responsibility naturally falls on the laps of schools when, for example, a scandal like the *joshi-kosei* scandal ("walking dates") by high school girls leads to prostitution and thus gets picked up by the media. Images of Japanese education before junior high school, however, are generally positive.

#### II. Early childhood education in Japan

The vast majority of Japanese children attend *yochien*, "kindergarten," from 4 to 6 years old in a school separate from the elementary school. While a select few *yochien* might aim to prepare kids academically, most are for play and to develop social skills. While the image of *yochien* as institutions that socialize kids has been positive, they have not escaped scandal. After Prime Minister Shinzo Abe authorized sale of government property to Moritomo Gakuen preschool for a shockingly low price, videos surfaced of the school's right wing nature and indoctrination techniques.

Given Abe's right-wing tendencies, this has provided the public with the image of corruption at the country's highest level, and with an educational institution, *yochien*, that generally avoids criticism.

Like *yochien*, the next step, elementary school, offers kids ample opportunities to feel a part of the community and society. Events like "Sports Day" offer socializing and light competition. Kids learn humility and life skills at elementary school by serving lunch and even cleaning hallways and toilets. And academic competition is deemphasized as report cards avoid letter grades and provide written comments.

Despite the relative freedom compared to junior and senior high school, elementary schools may still be viewed as restrictive or even regressive. Yoshifumi Taguchi, author of *The Pure and Beautiful Stream: Japan's Quest to Rediscover Its Lost Identity*, (2007) claims elementary education in the Edo Period was superior because lesson times were flexible, children had more choice, they progressed at their own pace, seats weren't all facing the blackboard and, crucially, children were given the chance to learn rather than "being taught."

Junior and senior high schools are, however, far more controversial.

### III. Educational institutions and social control

According to researcher and schoolteacher John Taylor Gatto, compulsory schooling began in Prussia as a way to win the Napoleonic Wars (2003). The original architects of compulsory schooling openly stated the aim of schools was to produce obedient soldiers and obedient factory workers. Accordingly, substantial blame for Japan's participation in World War 2 has been traced to the education of the era. Researcher Peter Cave notes that from the onset of the Meiji Era until 1945, schools were "designed to shape good workers and obedient imperial subjects" (p. 14). Similarly, the abbot of Kotaiji temple in Nagasaki explained about that era, "The youngest kamikaze pilots were 17; I was 16. But before (laughter) bombing by airplane our country was defeated by your country (the United States)! We were taught to die for the emperor, only to die. But now only to live! They (educators) misguided us." (Spiri, 2013). As Gatto wrote, "Schooling in concert with a controlled workplace is the most effective way to foreclose the development of imagination ever devised" (p. 107).

Training youth for the workplace, whether factory or corporate, remains an aim of public schools. Kids learn to complete tasks timely and as directed; they are expected to be punctual; between homework, *juku* (cram schools) and club activities, free time is minimized; and students are expected to look and dress a certain way, conservatively. These are all key features of corporate Japan. Cave (2009) explains "His (researcher Akihiro Ogawa's) concern is that Japanese people (children included) are being subtly but inexorably socialized into subjectivity that is only seemingly autonomous, and that predisposes them to serve the interests of a capitalist state that prioritizes business over human needs" (p. 33).

Moreover, tests become a prominent tool to cajole and distinguish weak from strong students from junior high school years. Performance on tests traditionally has dictated which students can attend the most prestigious high schools and universities, which in turn dictates, to a large extent, which students will earn high level jobs in government or the business world. Cave notes "...students were increasingly expected to learn and be assessed as individuals, especially in high-stakes entrance exams for high school and university, which largely determined their life chances" (p. 27).

Jessie James Lucky, a longtime Assistant Language Teacher in elementary and junior high schools, has not only observed failures in English education, but in the overall system as well. "...teachers are supposed to fill facts into students en-mass in a factory format. There is little time or motivation for the teachers to verify and update those facts once they are certified and hired" (personal communication, April 2017).

Craig Roberts, the father of two daughters who attended Japanese schools until second year of junior high school and fifth grade respectively, explains his reservations: "In my mind, the main problems were twofold: everything seemed to be focused on memorizing information, and along with that the idea that there was only one right answer to any question (very test-performance focused); related to that, the other problem was that critical thinking was not taught, encouraged, or supported" (personal communication, May 2017).

Furthermore, academics Ikegashira, Matsumoto and Morita write about a core problem: "The situation is terrible in public schools. In one junior high school (in Niigata prefecture), there were only three English teachers, only one of them full-time, for 500 students" (p. 6).

Some students don't thrive in such a system. There are more and more *hikikomori*—youth virtually unable to leave their rooms—and suicides. Out of Japan's reported average of 70 suicides a day, nearly one victim is school-age (Lu 2015).

#### IV. Positive Experiences

Whether because of or despite forms of social control, Japanese education does get some significantly positive results. Accordingly, Japan's public schools receive praise as well as scrutiny. Mary Nobuoka, whose son is a senior in junior high school, feels Japanese education gets a bad rap (personal communication).

“Young Japanese are certainly capable of critical thinking. And Japanese schools are great for socialization.” Nobuoka feels education here is easily superior to what kids get in her home country. “*Rigor* is being thrown around in the US, but what we have here is rigor.” She believes high expectations leads to better performance.

The most popular and indeed precise way to evaluate the success of a country's school system is to compare test scores.

Outside of English education, however, Japan holds its own in international rankings. In a 2016 article, *Business Insider* magazine ranked Japan 9th in the world calling them “one of the top performing countries for literacy, science, and maths in the OECD group” (Grut 2016).

In the same year, “Fair Reports” ranked them 2nd in the world. Their explanation, however, runs counter to the common observation that Japan is lagging regarding technology in education: “No other country deploys technology in education to the extent that Japan does” (no author, 2015).

Arguably the most comprehensive comparison is published in a report by the OECD—The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. This branch of the United Nations publishes a triennial report known as PISA—the “Programme for International Students Assessment.” The report targets 15 year-olds because they are at or nearing the end of compulsory education. PISA compares science, reading and mathematics. In that analysis, too, Japanese students fare well.

The last triennial comparison, published in 2015, shows Japan at or near the top (Gurría 2015). Compared to the 2012 data, scores improved in science, moving Japan into second place behind only Singapore. Meanwhile, only a handful of countries had higher mean scores for reading and mathematics.

When schooling success is measured numerically to such an extent, what happens to the “losers”—those who don't thrive academically—and the “misfits”—those who desire less structure and greater freedom?

#### V. Struggles with the system

*Futoukou*—the phenomenon of kids refusing to attend school—and the aforementioned *hikikomori* are worsening problems that Japan faces. It is instructive to consider a concrete example. The struggles of a young man “Ivan” (a pseudonym) provides an example that takes several issues into consideration.

While teachers were pushing kids to excel in clubs or in their studies, Ivan didn't feel he fit in. Cutting class became one way for him to deal with it. Eventually, the school notified his mother (British) and father (Japanese) about his unexplained absences. The problem escalated when Ivan flat-out refused to go to school. No fewer than 12 kids altogether became *futoukou* among Ivan's classmates, a drop in the sea of over 100,000 kids nationwide who are staying home. Macdonald (2005) notes the gravity of the problem of school refusal in Japan.

“The issue of school refusal (*futoukou*) is another troubling trend. Students are refusing to attend school in alarming numbers. In 2000, the Japanese Ministry of Education (MOE) reported that nearly 140,000 students were classified as *futoukou* (p. 79).

More disturbingly, Ivan became self-destructive and began cutting his arms with a knife and began having suicidal thoughts.

Ivan's problems at school, his mother maintains, had nothing to do with the fact that he is perceived as “half” with mixed ancestry. He hadn't been bullied and the only youth among the 12 *futoukou* who wasn't ethnically Japanese as far as the eye could see. Rather, his frank assessment of junior high school was “It's bullshit” (personal communication).

Struggling with a range of issues including Asberger's Syndrome, by junior high school Ivan regressed further becoming *hikkikomori*, self-destructive, and suicidal.

His mother Catriona Takeuchi explained, "Schools failed him miserably." (personal interview) Takeuchi had not been particularly impressed with schools while guiding her previous three children, but with Ivan she experienced total system failure. "They didn't seem to care. It took a year and a half for them to tell me there was a school counselor! She wasn't much help, but the homeroom teacher did eventually refer us to an outreach program." That step out proved crucial.

At graduation, the child with Asbergers—who would only leave the house with his head buried in a hoodie, staring straight down, planning to end his own life and the end of the torturous years of junior high school—fulfilled the role of MC, riffing with the crowd. After his clarinet performance, which included a 9 minute solo, the headmaster told him he looked forward to someday paying to hear him perform.

With the more wholistic approach and greater freedom at Kanbun, Ivan found and pursued his passion in the clarinet. Despite the passion Ivan felt and feels for the clarinet, Takeuchi emphasizes that that was just a relatively minor piece to the puzzle of fulfillment. The Kanbun community, teachers and students, fully accept the child with all their tics and quirks. They care more about effort and relationship building than academics.

While Kanbun and similar schools cost ¥1,000,000 or more a year, public schools are not exactly cheap either. Karl Hedburg learned as much when his ex-wife handed him a ¥1,200,000 bill for their two daughters' public high school education which included which included tuition of ¥118,800 for each child.

## **V. Homeschooling**

Four of Diane Tincher's eight children were homeschooled in Japan, some exclusively, while others intermittently studied at public schools. Although she is now agnostic or atheistic, her initial motivation was religious.

Although the homeschooled kids may have had their struggles socially, they have proven to be academically head-and-shoulders above their peers. Now all three who were exclusively home-schooled are all well-adjusted, successful adults. One actually received a graduate school scholarship to study law, and all settled into careers that have allowed them to live in relative comfort.

Meanwhile, one son who went through the school system struggled with culture shock at his university in the U.S. He was eventually diagnosed with "situational depression" and asked to withdraw.

But don't assume Tincher considers homeschooling superior. "I robbed my kids of the opportunities they needed for socialization, friends, clubs, and consistency," she explains. "My kids that did go to public schools here developed impressive self-discipline. Two of them who went through army boot camp said that it was a cinch compared to Japanese school."

Homeschooling is difficult on the parent/teacher. Tincher notes of homeschooling days, "The thought never occurred to me that there was such a thing as "me" time. Seriously."

## **VI. "Buying" a diploma**

Another option for those who don't attend school is taking a correspondence course offered by a private high school. These cost about the same as tuition at the school, but the only requirement is to do worksheets that must be turned into the school for grading.

Several of Tincher's daughter's friends, who were not inclined academically, found that path to be a relatively painless way to get ahold of a high school diploma.

## **VII. The Overseas Option**

Kirk Masden, a professor at Kumamoto Gakuen University, sent his son to high school in the US for a mixture of reasons.

"He wasn't having any serious school problems, but neither was he thriving," Masden explains. However, life at a boarding school in the US quickly unraveled.

“Friends were smoking marijuana. Larry (a pseudonym) joined them, but got totally carried away. Even the other kids were saying, ‘Whoa, take it easy.’ His performance suffered. He was often angry and eventually got expelled.”

Masden points out that, no matter what parents might feel about this or that cause, it’s really unknowable.

“Was the problem parenting? Schooling in Japan? Life in America? Maybe it was just his personality.”

Masden’s main complaint about Japanese education is the extent to which they try to control lives. “My son was not allowed to stay at a friend’s house on the weekend. This was a school rule. I don’t understand the reasoning. It definitely frustrated Larry, but I can never be sure how much this contributed to his anger and eventual delinquency. Keeping on the track of free-spirit, for better or worse, Larry is now a diving instructor on an island in Vietnam.

### **VIII. Conclusion**

In 1946 Albert Einstein famously said, “A new type of thinking is essential if mankind is to survive and move toward higher levels.” As Japan’s schools appear in decline at least in terms of social indicators such as hikikomori, futoukou and teen suicide, new approaches are arising. The 21st century is certainly offering more varied educational opportunities many of which involve study on the internet (see Appendix A). On the other hand, Japanese students do perform well on standardized exams. One question worth exploring is the degree to which this effort or obsession to push youth to excel academically is leading to the sort of misery that results in kids dropping out or giving up altogether. In seeking an answer, one cannot overlook the overall societal influence, the role of parents and home life, making it exceedingly difficult to find definitive answers.

### **Appendix A: Educational Alternatives in Japan**

With the great number of youth who are refusing to attend school, or even refusing to leave home, a number of alternatives are emerging. Some offer actual face to face meetings and campuses with a looser restrictions on attendance; others are offered on line. Below is a brief survey of some of the educational alternatives available to youth in Japan.

#### **1) Alternatives with campuses**

a. The outreach program in Osaka referred Ivan to Kansai Bunka Gakuin—known as Kanbun—a Clark international school in Osaka. This alternative high school was founded by Yuichiro Miura, the world’s oldest person to ever climb Mount Everest. Over 11,000 kids attend a Clark School in Japan. The schools are named after the 19th century American educator who famously said, “Boys, be ambitious.” Their aim is to encourage youth to find and pursue their passion without excessive concern for test scores or the rigidity of public school.

b. While some so-called “free schools” may not be accredited in Japan, such as Japan Freinet, Clark schools receive the stamp of government approval. The school’s “About Us” link explains “Japan Freinet is a free school that offers classes. Rather than outsourcing teachers and materials, our staff creates materials and teaches. To that end, the classes offer a great deal of group work. We are an organization that aims to study the very foundation of education. We offer our curriculum while coordinating our efforts with public school educators. We currently offer monthly study groups at locations in Shinjuku, Kanagawa, and Yamanashi and twice a year conduct research on school trips. Everyone is welcome” (author’s translation)

#### **2) Internet options**

My son Vincent was also homeschooled for six months after graduating from elementary school. While social isolation is a challenge for homeschooled kids, the internet can play a mitigating role. My son has gaming friends abroad who he interacts with online, frequently engaging in banter, picking up slang, joking, as well as getting teased and irritated. In short, all the elements of a human relationship.

##### **a) Oak Meadow**

The internet has also provides academic opportunities. Since September 2016, Vincent has studied at Oak Meadow, an accredited online school, K-12, based in Vermont, USA. Technically, kids enrolled in a school are not considered “homeschooled” even though their educational experience takes place at home.

The parents and teachers who founded Oak Meadow believe “learning can be joyfully integrated into (a child’s) life” and attempt to create a curriculum that is “progressive, compassionate, and child-centered.” Vincent submits

assignments via Google docs and his teacher comments. There is a great deal of reading and writing, but no tests. He submits the work at his own pace.

#### **b) Great Courses**

There are numerous websites appropriate for a youth's education. Tincher relied on the "Great Courses" website which offered courses in many academic disciplines for a reasonable fee. Vincent has been taking How to Draw by David Brody. The course contains thirty videos of approximately 30 minutes each mostly focusing on practical skill-based drawing activities but also touching on art history and theory as well.

#### **c) Khan Academy**

Similarly, Khan Academy, which began by offering Youtube math lessons, has evolved into an excellent free site for studying a wide range of subjects. With more time than a typical 13 year old, my son also studies Spanish with Lingoda.

#### **d) Masterclass**

Finally, he has been watching Werner Herzog online filmmaking videos as part of the "Master Class" series. Like many kids his age, he presently wants to be a "Youtuber."

#### **e) Japanese Online Institute**

Other than speaking with his mother, keeping up his Japanese skills has been a challenge, so this fall he will enroll in Japanese Language Proficiency course for N2 or N1 level with the Japanese Online Institute.

#### **f) Japanese online high schools**

As for online education in Japanese, KTC, a subsidiary of Chuo Shuppan in Nagoya, offers a high school education. Youth enroll in Yakushima Ouzora (Blue Sky) High School, study at home, and occasionally visit one of KTC's 36 campuses to make friends and take specialized courses such as illustrating or acting. KTC also offers a 5 day nature-based program in Yakushima, a world heritage site. Students at KTC might be troubled youth, working adults, or individuals who desire greater freedom with their educational pursuits. NHK offers similar courses in Japan.

#### **Appendix B: URL for educational alternatives**

- "Kanbun": <http://www.kansaiarts.ac.jp/>
- Japan Freenet: <http://www.jfreinet.com/basic2/index.html>
- Oak Meadow: <http://oakmeadow.com/>
- Great Courses: <https://www.thegreatcoursesplus.com/>
- <https://www.khanacademy.org/>
- <https://www.masterclass.com/>
- <http://www.japonin.com/>
- <http://www.ktc-school.com/>
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