

Educational injustice in Japanese Society

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Abstract

The long-standing inequality in economic distribution and educational equity are difficult to correct in a short period of time, and the Japanese government still needs to make more efforts to maintain educational equity.

Keywords

Exam-based university entrance The policy of “relaxed education” Increasing disproportion on income and wealth gap.

1. Introduction

Over the past 100 years, the Japanese government has had a significant positive impact on the country as a whole by developing the education system, furthering Japan's economic growth and increasing its overall national power. Japan is now one of the top ten countries in the world in terms of educational attainment, with more than ninety-five proportion of the Japanese population having literacy skills (1). Nevertheless, the achievements of the past should not be taken as a reason to ignore the shortcomings and potential dangers of the Japanese educational system.

2. Exam-based University Entrance

In order to better understand the problems in Japanese education, we need to first explain the educational system in modern Japanese society. Currently, the Japanese government does provide an adequate education to the majority of the population, so that 99% of the current adult population in Japan is literate, about 50% of all students have a college education, and over 95% of Japanese high school students complete all of their high school courses. This figure compares favorably with the U.S. high school graduation rate of about 89% over the same period (1). However, the acceptance rate of college attainment in Japan is slightly less than the sixty-nine percent of U.S. students who received a college education as shown in the 2018 statistics (2). This is because the rise of Japan in modern times is inextricably linked to the reform of the education system; public education and higher education were seen by the Japanese public and government as the key to social progress and catching up with advanced Western countries, and the rapidly developing education system had an indelible positive impact on the modernization of Japan, allowing it to quickly absorb emerging technologies and ideas (3). The Meiji leaders rapidly modernized the schooling system by extending the years of compulsory education, making it free, and ensuring that both men and women could participate in compulsory education. The compulsory education for children was extended from three to four years in 1886 to six years in 1908, and then to nine years at the end of World War II, with the enactment of the Basic Law of Education and the School Education Law, which established the education system that continues today: six years of elementary school, three years of junior high school, three years of high school, and two or four years of university.

Theoretically, this socially inclusive education system should be conducive to the development of educational equity, as it ensures the completion of the nine years of compulsory education mandated by the Japanese government. But in fact, because the Japanese people have

experienced huge dividends from the reform of the modern education system in the decades after World War II, most Japanese families are very concerned about their children's education along with have higher expectations for their children's learning, hoping that an elite education will lay the foundation for their future careers (3).

In university entrance exams, Japanese university admissions officers tend to use academic test scores as the key or even the only determining factor to ensure objectivity and fairness in the selection process. This is because the main purpose of the optimization and improvement of its education system is to quickly catch up with developed Western societies, so the Japanese education system focuses more on a series of "standardized" teaching methods such as rote memorization of cultural and technological knowledge, and does not pay attention to the improvement of students' individuality and thinking ability.

This undoubtedly accelerated the rise in the average literacy level of Japanese society and led to the rapid economic development of Japan after World War II, which is considered a miracle. At the same time, however, because education was seen as a way to break out of class and change one's fate, the competition to enter elite high schools and universities became extremely difficult. In the 1960s, approximately all Japanese high schools were stratified for students of different academic levels, which led to a chain of after-school tutoring classes for parents who wanted their children to stand out from the brutal competition (4.).

According to a survey, about 29% of Japanese students choose higher quality private high schools during their high school years to ensure better performance in university entrance exams (1). Private schools, which provide a more focused and comprehensive elite education, often cost two to three times as much as public schools, and the gap is even more dramatic for elementary school, where the cost of private versus public education can be more than four times as much. As a result, most low- and middle-income families in Japan rely heavily on the public education system, but the average cost of public education has risen from ¥200,000 to ¥530,000 over the past 25 years, and this insane increase in public school fees is bound to be an obstacle to educational equity, a phenomenon that the Japanese public does not currently see well controlled by the government (5).

3. The Policy of "Relaxed Education"

Since the 1980s, the Japanese government has noticed that the long-standing emphasis on test scores in entrance examinations for Japanese universities has intensified the intensity of selection tests and has led to students having to devote much of their leisure time with family and friends to excessive competition in studies, which experts believe induces excessive emotional stress and inadequate rest in children and has a negative impact on their physical and mental health. This has a negative impact on their physical and mental health.

In 1987, with the support of the Japanese Ministry of Education (MOE), the National Council for Educational Reform (NCER) decided to begin to deregulate the school system in pursuit of diversified and independent learning. In 1993, the MOE further introduced a credit-based comprehensive high school system similar to those in Europe and the United States, incorporating a system of elective courses to broaden students' interests (5).

In 2000, the National Education Reform Commission submitted its final report, which further emphasized the need for diversified and individualized education and the need for cooperation between families, schools, and society to achieve this goal. As a result, in 2002, the Japanese government launched a policy of "relaxed education" (yutori education, meaning relaxation and stress reduction). This policy aims to reduce the burden of students and encourage self-learning by drastically reducing the school curriculum, with the hope of changing the long-standing rote learning style of Japanese students to one of independent exploration and cultivation of children's "passion" for learning and life, and enriching their hobbies and interests(3.).

"The unified education system was effective in producing human resources that could support Japan's rapid economic growth," Ken Terawaki, a former government member of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, said in an interview at the time, "but times have changed. We need a system that helps children build their personalities." (6.).

As a result, Japanese educational institutions have drastically eliminated 30 percent of the school curriculum and heavily restricted schools and teachers from testing students, and have cut the length of specific classes by 10 to 15 percent. Since 2002, the number of hours of study in elementary schools has been reduced from 5,785 to 5,367, and the number of hours of study in middle and high schools has been reduced to some extent (4.). Opponents of the policy have argued that not only does it make it difficult for students to improve their overall reasoning, but that the excessive reduction in content and learning time reduces students' basic learning skills. Some opponents of this policy point out that the Japanese government has not explained in detail to schools and parents the importance of "enthusiasm for life" and the lack of experience in fostering students' self-motivation, so that the reduction of curriculum content and class time has reduced students' learning ability (6).

According to the PISA survey, after the reform of lenient education, the reading score of Japanese 15-year-olds fell from the eighth place in the 2000 survey to the fourteenth place in 2006, and the ranking of mathematics ability dropped from the first to the fourth place in the world. This has also led to strong public opposition to the lenient education policy (6.).

4. Increasing Disproportion on Income and Wealth Gap

On the other hand, the "lenient education" reform does not fundamentally change the problems in the Japanese education system, and many media have stated that there is a huge social stratification and even a social fault in the Japanese society. In the interview, economist Nagai said, "In recent years, the number of low-income people in Japan has been increasing, while the proportion of the middle class has been decreasing. " At the end of the interview, Nagai claimed that Japan's middle class is disappearing (7.). This has led to a huge gap between the cost of private education as well as public education in Japan, which is difficult to correct. The inappropriate proportion of wealth and income results in changes in the opinion of education opportunities.

A survey from 2018 reports that around 62.3% of interviewers agree that it is normal and unavoidable that the wealthy family have access to better education, whereas the same survey done in 2004 states that only 46.4% of interviewers agree with that (5). The researchers report are several main reasons for this circumstance. Parents and social organizations nowadays state that limited education resources should not be wasted on children with low motivation and abilities. Besides limited financial support, parents in poverty also rarely give emotional and academic support for their children when they have issues (5).

5. Conclusion

The long-standing inequality in economic distribution and educational equity are difficult to correct in a short period of time, and the Japanese government still needs to make more efforts to maintain educational equity.

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