

Japan's Educational Disparities and the “Myth of Equality”

Is compulsory education in Japan able to respond to the differences in each child's environment? In this edition of *My Vision*, we consider the current status of educational disparity, what lies behind it, and the future of public education.

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Educational Disparities Are Directly Related to Japan's Declining Birthrate - Are We Responding to the Diversity of Children's Family Environments and Attributes?

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Ensuring high-quality education for all is one of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. Education can break the cycle of poverty and correct inequality. Japan possesses a system of compulsory education, but is it the case that all children have equal access to high-quality educational opportunities? Some children are unable to attend cram schools because of their family environment, and others miss out on educational opportunities because they have trouble adapting to school life. What is the current status of educational disparity in Japan, and what lies behind it? What is the best direction for Japan's school education?" In this edition of *My Vision*, we seek the opinions of experts in the field of education.

Keywords...Educational disparities and declining birthrate, children's rights, fair education

Expert Opinions

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Keywords...socioeconomic disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes, data-driven policy-making

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Professor, Faculty of Sociology, Musashi University

Keywords...Disparities in academic achievement by socioeconomic status (SES), low-income households and single-mother households, myth of equality

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Professor, Graduate School of Human Sciences, Osaka University

Keywords...Fixed hierarchy, guarantee of academic performance, diversity in public schools

Question the Current Status of School Education

Kenryu Nakamura

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Keywords...Children taking control of learning, public action for educational change, LEARN

Interview period : May-June, 2023

Interviewer : Sosuke Suzuki (Research Coordinator and Research Fellow, NIRA)

About This Issue

Educational Disparities Are Directly Related to Japan's Declining Birthrate

-Are We Responding to the Diversity of Children's Family Environments and Attributes?



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The word “educate” is derived from a Latin word meaning “to draw out potential,” and it cannot be disputed that the type of education that a person receives is important in enabling them to fulfill their potential and to thrive in their own unique way. The issue of disparities in education is therefore a matter of great concern. The quality and quantity of education that children receive varies depending on their family environment and conditions, which in turn affects their educational background and their later life. The term “cycle of poverty” is an easy way to picture the problem. However,

educational disparities do not only exist in situations of poverty. For example, not a great many parents are able to oversee their children's performance of homework on a daily basis. A difference in this attention to homework may affect their children's academic performance. In addition, while some families are able to provide their children with a variety of cultural experiences, including travel and extracurricular lessons and activities, there are also many families who would like to give their children these experiences but cannot afford to do so. While the government's free education program can be expected to have a certain effect, it alone cannot fully address the problem of the family environment affecting children's academic performance and educational background.

Despite the diversity of family circumstances, it cannot be said that the current public education system gives sufficient consideration to children's family environment, or to their attributes and abilities. The necessary support should be provided in an appropriate fashion based on the family environment and the upbringing that form part of the child's background. As one of the experts interviewed for this edition points out, the “myth of equality” in educational administration is open to question, and the attitude of treating children homogeneously without considering their differences cannot be seen as true equality. The same problem applies to the non-attendance of children who do not fit in with school education. Is there a uniform image of the human being that education is aiming to produce, and are children who do not fit into the framework being ostracized? We must be prepared to rethink our system of education.

In this edition of *My Vision*, we consider the issue of educational disparities from the perspective of a variety of experts in the field of education.

Disparities in Education Left Unaddressed by the System

First, how should we understand the current status of educational disparities in Japan? Ryoji Matsuoka, an Associate Professor at Ryukoku University, underscores that Japanese compulsory education has not effectively eliminated socioeconomic disparities in educational opportunities and

outcomes. He strongly refutes the argument that “since all students are provided with the same opportunities through compulsory education, individuals' educational achievement depends solely on their ability and effort.” His research shows that children from different socioeconomic backgrounds have different basic learning skills at the start of elementary school, and these disparities persist throughout the schooling years, leading to different levels of educational attainment.

According to Professor Yuko Nonoyama-Tarumi of Musashi University, compared to other countries, in Japan, the size of the gap in academic achievement in the lower-tail of SES, which includes children from low-income families and single-mother households, is relatively large within the overall gap in academic achievement in the SES distribution. Professor Nonoyama-Tarumi makes us keenly aware of the urgency of creating a systematic program of support for children from low-income families that makes them structurally prone to academic disadvantage. She points to the “myth of equality” in educational administration - the concept that all students should be treated equally - in addition to the state of the high school system as reasons why this disparity has been neglected in Japan. As a result of segregation between high schools by students' SES, she says, there is little diversity within schools and fewer opportunities for students to develop feelings of empathy for those who are in different circumstances from themselves.

Against this background, we can be greatly encouraged by the efforts described by Katsuji Yamada, the Principal of Osaka Prefectural Nishinari High School. This high school enrolls many children who are educationally disadvantaged due to their families' financial difficulties or difficult parent-child relationships. The school helps students become self-reliant by providing care tailored to their actual circumstances, even offering “relearning” of content studied in elementary and junior high school, in order to enable them to earn and provide for themselves following graduation. Underlying this is the powerful concept that the essence of education is to break through the reproduction of disparities. Sharing this philosophy widely should spark the beginning of a national discussion on overcoming educational disparities. In addition, in order to advance the discussion, it will be essential to upgrade the data available to us, such as the results of panel surveys, in order to allow us to ascertain the reality of educational disparities, as both Professor Matsuoka and Professor Nonoyama-Tarumi point out. It is surprising that a developed society such as Japan's does not possess such data, which could serve as a basis for policy-making.

Necessary Reforms in School Education

What should school education look like in the future in order to realize fair educational opportunities? Professor Koukichi Shimizu of Osaka University advocates guaranteeing academic achievement for all children. He believes that the talent of children with high academic ability should be brought out, while at the same time those with a low level of academic ability should be supported and boosted. He points out that it will be necessary to increase the scholastic workforce in order to ensure that there is an adequate allocation of teachers for this purpose. It will also be important to urge that improvement of the stability and quality of public schools, which the majority of children attend, is necessary for the future of the country. Professor Shimizu believes that society as a whole should support public schools in which diverse children, including those with a non-Japanese background, or children with disabilities, can grow up together.

On the other hand, Mr. Kenryu Nakamura, a Senior Research Fellow at The University of Tokyo's Research Center for Advanced Science and Technology, sounds a warning regarding the state of school education today. Mr. Nakamura claims that a school system and parenting practices that seek to create a homogeneous human being possessing a specific level of ability and conforming to a specific image are depriving children of their natural curiosity and potential. In addition, he emphasizes the fact that children who are ill-suited to this type of educational environment will have more difficult lives. We need to allow children to have experiences in which they grapple with learning, enabling them to grasp the point to be learned by themselves. The challenge for the future will be how parents, schools, and society are able to change their attitudes toward education from the ground up.

Education Is the Cornerstone of a Society in Which People Can Have Children With a Feeling of Peace of Mind

If a child's future is restricted by his or her family's living environment or level of culture, that child's rights are also limited. In a society in which a child's future depends on the economic and cultural level of his or her parents, it is impossible to raise a child with a feeling of peace of mind. Fear of not being able to provide one's children with an adequate education as a result of the family environment leads to a reluctance to have children. We must become keenly aware that educational disparity is not only unhealthy for our society, but may also be directly related to the serious issue of the declining birthrate that our nation is facing. In order to build a society in which people can have children with a feeling of peace of mind, we must create a high-quality educational foundation. Now is the time for the entire nation to work together on this very important task.

Kazuhiro Higashi is NIRA's Executive Vice President and Senior Advisor to Resona Holdings, Inc. After serving as Chairman of the Board and President and Representative Director, he assumed his current position in June 2022.

Expert Opinions

Data-driven Education Policy-making for Substantive Improvements, Not Mere Pretense



Ryoji Matsuoka

Associate Professor, Faculty of
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The term “Kyoiku Kakusa” (教育格差) refers to educational disparities in educational outcomes, including academic performance and final educational attainment. Individuals tend to have different education outcomes partly depending on ascriptive factors such as their parents' educational attainment and occupational status, household income, region of origin, and biological sex (i.e., the conditions at birth). On the other hand, another similar-sounding term, “Gakureki Kakusa” (学歴格差), literally translated as “educational credential disparities,” refers to the tendency that individuals with higher education credentials are more likely to receive favorable opportunities and treatment, for example, when job hunting.

Disparities in outcomes that can be traced back to one's “birth” become evident at an early stage of life. For example, nationally representative data indicate that children from different socioeconomic groups begin elementary school with different basic learning skills. One of the main reasons for these outcome gaps is considered to be derived from socioeconomic disparities in educational opportunities between families.

The widespread claim that everyone is given the same opportunity in compulsory education and that one's final educational attainment depends on ability and effort ignores the reality captured by the data. Disparities in opportunities based on the socioeconomic status of the family of origin, including parental level of education and household income, exist not only between families and between national, public, and private schools but also between public elementary schools (between neighborhoods) that 98% of children attend.

Public schools in socioeconomically advantaged areas, where most children come from families with both parents holding college degrees, and those in socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhoods, where few parents have college degrees, cannot be considered equivalent educational environments. This distinction is observed partly as differences in attitudes toward learning and higher education of both parents and children. More specifically, the former schools are characterized by most children focusing on academics, anticipating higher education pursuits, participating in additional academic lessons outside of schools, and engaging in extracurricular activities, whereas many children in the latter schools lack a clear educational goal.

Japanese compulsory education serves to prevent the widening of educational disparities that exist at the early stage of elementary schooling, but it is not enough to reduce them. The extent of educational disparities in Japan is average compared to other advanced countries, making Japan a mediocre society in terms of educational equality.

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has put forward policies that sound reasonable based on simplistic arguments but has done little to rigorously investigate their effectiveness. Additionally, MEXT has frequently attempted to disseminate “good practices” in teaching and school management, but these practices have not been proven effective in the first place, and it is also questionable whether they can be replicated in schools with students of different socioeconomic backgrounds.

According to data comparable over the past 20 years, spreading “good practices” has not significantly improved educational disparities between socioeconomic groups or the nation's average student academic achievement. To change this ineffective way of governing the education system, we need to shift to evidence-based educational policy-making that focuses on improving outcomes, rather than creating the illusion of “taking action.” Specifically, we need to establish a cycle of incorporating research findings into policy, and then repeatedly evaluating the effectiveness of education policies and classroom practices through multiple longitudinal surveys that track students and schools.

Professor Matsuoka specializes in the field of sociology of education, with a research focus on addressing educational inequalities to create a society where individuals can fully realize their potential. His research, which utilizes large-scale datasets, has been published in peer-reviewed journals both nationally and internationally. He earned his Ph.D. in Educational Policy Studies from the College of Education at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.

Expert Opinions

Providing a Systematic Program of Support to Children from Disadvantaged Family Backgrounds



Yuko Nonoyama-Tarumi

Professor, Faculty of Sociology,
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An international comparison has shown that in Japan, the school-level association between students' socioeconomic status (SES) and academic achievement at the senior high school level is extremely high. In other words, Japan has a segregated high school system in which students are sorted into different schools not only by their academic ability in entrance examinations, but also by their family backgrounds. In a high school system with little diversity within schools, students have few opportunities to interact with students from different family backgrounds. The lack of opportunities to relate with, learn with, and empathize with people in different situations may be one reason why people do not see inequality as a social problem.

Furthermore, an international comparison of where in the SES distribution the educational inequality is relatively large within a society reveals that in Japan, the ratio of achievement gap at lower-tail SES to achievement gap at upper-tail SES is large. In other words, children from low-income households and children from single-mother households, who are more likely to suffer economic disadvantage, display a relatively greater level of academic underachievement. These children need a systematic program of support, rather than "luck" in whether or not they happen to be blessed with attentive teachers and schools. In the U.S., it is established by law that the federal government allocates additional funds to schools with many children from low-income families and schools with many migrant or other children who are non-native speakers of English. It is important for Japan to consider a compensation policy that provides additional financial resources for children from disadvantaged family backgrounds, and to guarantee academic achievement through, for example, increasing the number of teachers who support these children, providing after-school learning support, and supporting educational expenses through "vouchers" for out-of-school education.

Lying behind the neglect of disparities in academic achievement in Japan is the "myth of equality" among educational administration and schools. The idea that all students should be treated equally has discouraged discussions focused on additional support for low-income children. There is also a lack of educational data necessary for such discussions, particularly nation-wide panel surveys by the government that follow children's academic ability over time, resulting in inadequate understanding of the current state and mechanisms that generate disparities in academic achievement.

Disparities in academic achievement are a manifestation of broader social issues that go beyond education, such as welfare and social security; it goes without saying that there is a need for policies that focus on the economic situation of families, such as income redistribution and social welfare policies. However, it is simultaneously essential to first deepen our understanding of the current educational disparities based on data, secondly to discuss what kind of society we want to build and what the purpose of education is for our society, and thirdly to consider ways of ensuring diversity within schools and the introduction of a systematic program of support for children from disadvantaged family backgrounds.

Professor Nonoyama-Tarumi specializes in the sociology of education and comparative education. Her research interests include the mechanisms that generate disparities in academic achievement and comparative research on educational disparities. Her publications include Yuko Nonoyama-Tarumi [2017], "Educational achievement of children from single-mother and single-father families: The case of Japan," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 79(4), pp. 915-931. She is a member of the Expert Committee on the National Achievement Study and a Fellow of the International Academy of Education. Professor Nonoyama-Tarumi holds a Ph.D. from the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Columbia University.

Expert Opinions

“Relearning” What Should Have Been Learned in Elementary and Middle School: Paving the Way to Realizing Self-Reliance for High School Students Who Are Poor or Non-Attendant



Katsuji Yamada

Principal, Osaka Prefectural
Nishinari High School

The culture and the living environment of parents are transmitted to the child. At the high school at which I serve as Principal, we take in children who have not adjusted academically in elementary and junior high school, or who have been truants. Many of them are in difficult situations in terms of family finances and parent-child relationships. The poverty rate among our children is well above the Osaka Prefecture average, and it is often the case that their mothers and fathers were raised in similar environments. The gap in academic ability is noticeable from about the third year of elementary school, when children learn to calculate with figures that they write. That gap widens depending on whether or not a child has someone to help them with their homework at home. The peak of truancy is seen around the second year of junior high school, when children begin to dislike school due to the

sheer accumulation of things that they do not understand. High school is the forum in which such educational disparities are most strongly manifested. Almost all junior high school students take the high school entrance examination, and their grades determine the high school they enter. Unfortunately, the kind of high school they attend will determine the rest of their lives.

Our school also offers “relearning” programs for subjects that students studied in elementary and junior high school. We enable students who did not achieve adequate learning outcomes due to truancy to start over from the basics in high school in order to offer them the opportunity to enter the workforce in the future. Some students say that they wish to relearn from the elementary school level. What is important to us is taking the approach that it is not the fault of the students themselves that they do not understand what they are studying. We do not blame them for what they are unable to do, but recognize and praise them for what they are able to. In some classes, our school uses 30-minute intervals to maintain concentration, and first-year students take “relearning” classes in English, Japanese, and mathematics every day from Monday to Friday. Small class sizes are the basis of the program, and support teachers are assigned to the students.

Even if a child enters high school, dropping out of school will lead quite directly to a life of poverty. Graduating from high school is an important passport to a child's future life. 70% of our students work part-time jobs in the evening, and we have therefore reduced the number of absences by delaying the start of school by one hour to accommodate the students' actual needs. For children who cannot rely on others because they do not know how to, we have opened the “Ibashi Café”* in the school, where students can casually drop in for a chat or consultation, and NPO youth workers are there to listen. For many years, our school has put a great deal of effort into helping students find employment, and for 12 consecutive years, the job offer rate for job applicants from the school has been 100%.

Depending on the school, there are different local characteristics and different home environments. We thoroughly analyze the actual situation at home while deciding how to respond; for example, what type of floor plan does a student have in their study area at home; does the student have a desk to study at. Our school, which accepts many children from difficult home environments, is committed to supporting self-reliance to ensure that students can earn and live on their own. We believe that the essence of education is to break down the reproduction of disparities.

*An “ibashi” is a place where a person “fits in.”

Nishinari High School enrolls many children living in difficult home environments. The school's “Anti-poverty Learning” program, which seeks to break the cycle of inequality and poverty, has been widely covered by the media. Mr. Yamada served as Vice-Principal and later Principal of the school from 2005 to 2013 before being transferred; he was reassigned as the school's Principal in 2017. He has created an environment conducive to learning by looking deeply into the realities of students' lives, and has lowered the dropout rate, which was once close to 20%, to single digits. Mr. Yamada is a graduate of Kyoto Prefectural University's Faculty of Letters.

Expert Opinions

Increase the Workforce in Public Schools to Support the Academic Performance of the Stratum of Failing Students



Koukichi Shimizu

Professor, Graduate School of Human Sciences, Osaka University

We must avoid a future in which educational disparities fix hierarchies in place. In the past, status and property were passed directly from parents to children in status-based societies. Equality of education has been introduced twice in Japan, during the Meiji Restoration and the postwar period; these efforts created conditions in Japanese society enabling people to move between social strata by means of education. Now, however, the transmission of social status from parents to their children is once again gaining strength. In addition to each family's economic situation, cultural standards, and human relationships and connections (i.e., “social capital”), the academic ability and educational record of children are determined by the strength of their parents' desire to send them to university. Indicated by such phenomena as the fact that the term “oya gacha” (meaning “parental lottery”) (see note) has recently become widespread in Japan, the general public seems to be becoming more aware

of a disparity between families.

Our goal should be to provide a solid foundation for students in the low-achieving stratum in school education. Rather than narrowing the gap that exists by reducing opportunities for students who are more academically able, the goal should be to support the stratum which has fallen behind and guarantee academic achievement to all children. To achieve this, it will be necessary to restore trust in public education. Specifically, the first step will be to increase the workforce in the field of education. The number of teachers involved in compulsory education should be increased, and two teachers should be assigned to each classroom to ensure that instruction tailored to proficiency level and supplementary teaching can be provided without difficulty. The best ways to achieve this would include increasing the number of teachers, increasing school budgets, and paying teachers appropriate overtime wages, but it would also be beneficial to encourage students and parents to volunteer to help. The public's view of teachers is also problematic. First, we must correct the fact that the number of people who aspire to become teachers is declining as a result of the trend of “teacher-bashing.” Second, because students who display a low level of academic performance lack motivation to study, the creation of a “mutual learning” environment, in which children teach each other, would represent an excellent means of encouraging study. The creation of healthy learning groups would raise overall academic performance and supplement the shortage in the educational workforce.

The excellence of public schools lies in their ability to enable students to learn about diversity. When diverse children, such as children with a non-Japanese parent or a non-Japanese background, or children with disabilities, are educated together, they develop empathy and tolerance for others. It is difficult to foster such feelings in an environment in which children of similar backgrounds are clustered together after passing examinations to enter government or private schools. In Tokyo and other large metropolitan areas, there is a strong tendency for parents to send their children to private schools, but in Japan as a whole, 98-99% of elementary school students and approximately 90% of junior high school students attend public schools. If we do not ensure the stability of public schools and improve their quality, it could threaten the survival of Japan as a nation. The good qualities of public schools should be more highly valued, and society as a whole should support public schools.

(Note: An expression that describes the type of parents to which a child is born and the circumstances into which the child is born as a matter of luck; analogous to terminology used in social network games.)

Professor Shimizu specializes in the sociology of education, clinical pedagogy, and coexistence studies. Both his parents graduated from junior high school and had no more involvement with formal education. He himself was able to develop his academic ability through his school education, and he stresses the importance of ensuring that all children have an adequate education. Professor Shimizu holds a Ph.D. from the Graduate School of Education of The University of Tokyo. He is the author of numerous books.

Expert Opinions

Question the Current Status of School Education



Kenryu Nakamura

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Modern school education has created an efficient system of learning that aims to produce in children the abilities and human qualities expected by society. In this context, children who are not able to fit in with school education experience considerable difficulties in their lives. Although in recent years there have been more options for children to learn even if they are non-attendant, modern compulsory education can leave children in a “gray zone,” with no place to go. By contrast, families with a strong commitment to education systematically lay down the foundations for study even before their children enter elementary school. Such children develop intellectual reflexes, respond quickly to instruction, and grow into children who are able to perform tasks precisely and accurately. However, many of these young people become confused and unable to perform when they are told that they can think

and act as they wish.

School education and parenting that attempts to create such homogeneous human beings has deprived children of their natural curiosity and potential. The essence of education is not to create a herd of children with good memories, able to respond to questions quickly. What is needed is learning that each child comes to on his or her own through the experience of learning that does not flow smoothly. Also, rather than aiming for everyone to be “cheerful, friendly, and energetic,” and then ostracizing children who do not fit this model, we need a school education that includes children with a variety of characteristics and disabilities, and in which children can create something positive together.

Seeking to achieve this goal, we have developed an education program called “LEARN” in cooperation with companies and local communities. Children, from the most gifted to those who dislike studying, meet for the first time on the day the program is conducted and work together to solve problems, irrespective of their grades or any disabilities that they might have. What is important is that the children enjoy themselves. LEARN provides a rich, formative experience that fosters curiosity and makes children aware of the fun and freedom of learning. If schools can freely make use of such opportunities as an “alternative classroom,” schools will naturally change.

Only the will of the general public can change education today. Instead of waiting for the government to make a move, the first step is to change the mindset of parents. We need to break away from the current standard thinking that forces children to attend cram schools from a young age in the pursuit of efficiency and imposes on them an ideal image of a human being based on the current belief that “not good at studying or school = not suited for society.” It is also necessary to change the mindset of parents and schools, which assume that all children should be treated the same, despite the fact that there are innate differences in people's abilities. Children who have difficulty in reading, writing, and communicating should be encouraged to use technology to compensate for their innate differences in ability, rather than forcing them to work hard on the assumption that everyone can succeed if they try hard enough.

Mr. Nakamura specializes in the study of assistive technologies. He conducts empirical research towards the realization of a society that recognizes unique human resources and accepts diversity. In 2014, he launched “ROCKET,” a project that sought to discover exceptional talents among children who do not fit in at school, capable of disruptive innovation (the project was completed in 2021). Currently, he oversees “LEARN,” a program that provides a type of learning that differs from school education to ensure that students can continue studying what they wish to study, irrespective of whether or not they possess innate ability. He completed coursework towards a Doctoral degree from the Graduate School of Education, Hiroshima University.