

High School Student Culture and School Hierarchy in Japan

Naoki OTAWA

Global COE Program

“Science of Human Development for Restructuring the ‘Gap-Widening Society’”

Ochanomizu University

High School Student Culture and School Hierarchy in Japan

Naoki OTAWA
The University of Tokyo

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to attain a general view of the high school student culture in Japan. First, it reconfirms, through survey analysis, a basic finding that Mimizuka Hiroaki (1980) pointed out: high school student culture differentiates according to the school hierarchy. Students who have a low expectation to succeed in the school's social selection system tend to commit themselves to the delinquent culture. Second, similar results were confirmed in the student's school commitment. The students at a high-ranked school commit strongly to their schoolwork and consider the school to be a reference group. In contrast, the number of students who are not happy at school or are dissatisfied with their school increases in the lower-ranked schools. Third, the contemporary situation is different from the situation of the 1970s, though commonalities are seen in the basic structure of high school culture. For instance, the authority of the school is more collapsed now than it was thirty years ago. There are not many students who remember their teachers' full names, and lateness/absences have increased. At the students' consciousness level, school is not necessarily considered to be an arena of studious competition.

Key words: High school student culture, meritocracy, tracking, sociology of education

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to attain a general view of high school student culture and behavior in metropolitan areas of Japan, through analysis of the survey data. It is important to note how the tracking system that differentiates student culture truly functions. This subject is tied to the theme of the ways in which students are socialized in secondary education. Student cultural studies have clarified the status of students' socialization in secondary education. According to what we know about student culture, a student acquires certain values in his or her school life.

1) Tracking System and High School Student Culture in Japan

The tracking of Europe and the United States is a so-called "streaming" track, in which a school distributes students in classes based on their scholastic attainments. Here, students in the higher end of the stream tend to commit to academic culture, while students at the lower end of the stream tend to become part of the delinquent culture (Hargreaves 1967). This phenomenon is called "tracking" because the school system provides a track in which its students' actions and culture are differentiated by the academic groups to which they

belong.

Generally, the Japanese tracking system has been formed not in the classroom, but in the school as a unit. Secondary education in Japan has a single track system. In the multiple track system, the academic track and the occupation track are set up, and another graduation qualification is set in each track. In contrast, the same graduation qualification is given to students in any type of high school in the Japanese system, even though there are ordinary schools and occupational schools. In Japan's school system, which must accept various students in a single track system, schools are ranked hierarchically by academic level. This system was not designed intentionally; rather, all schools are thought to be equal even if they possess individuality. Yet, the school hierarchy is firmly in place, and as a result each student is selected for entrance in a particular high school when he or she is in junior high school. It has become clear that student culture differentiates widely according to the school rankings of the 1970s and 80s (Takeuchi 1972; Iwaki and Mimizuka 1983).

The Japanese school system of the 1970s-80s had a characteristic peculiar to that period, which was marked by economic growth. The prototypical story of success—"From a good school to a good company"—was widely shared in society. In fact, the result of school

selection determined each student's future opportunities for success. Even if students could not attend the top school, in order to enter the best possible schools, they participated in a selection competition. The pressure of the entrance exam competition was high and it was thought that the differentiation of student culture through tracking occurred by the mechanism in which a student with a low chance of becoming the winner of the competition would commit him- or herself to the delinquent culture as a reaction to his or her school (Mimizuka 1980).

Afterward, cramming of the knowledge caused by heating of an entrance exam competition was criticized as a big educational problem in the latter half of the 1980's.

In response to this tendency, a conversion from "cramming education" was planned in the 1990s, during which "relaxed education" or "pressure-free education" was advocated as a part of educational policy. These methods focused on valuing the experience and diversification of education, which meant that students could relax. Moreover, the students were encouraged to think about a life path based on their dreams and what they want to do with their lives, in order to discover the meaning of their study.

At the same time, Japanese society experienced economic and social changes. A degree of economic growth was achieved in the 1980s, after which the Japanese economy went through a recession in the 1990s. The amount of non-regular labor increased and unstable forms of employment came about in regular labor. Moreover, even if they did not study much, students became able to enter a university easily due to the falling of birthrate. It is impossible to assert that the schools of the 2000s are the same as those of the 1970s. The trends in the educational world and the economic society brought about a decline of the aspirations of high school students, an increase in the number of students who do not study, and a decline in academic achievement. In such a situation, how did the relationship between the tracking system and the student culture change? This paper will analyze survey data that focuses on this point.

2) Research Question

Question 1: Is student culture different according to tracking (school hierarchy)?

First, I examine whether or not a basic finding by Mizumura Hiroaki (1980) was reconfirmed.

Question 2: What are the characteristics of student culture and student behavior in the 2000s?

Second, I investigate the characteristics of student culture, focusing especially on the collapse of relations between some student cultures and the tracking of the

school hierarchy.

Hypothesis 2 a: High school students may not fulfill student's responsibilities.

If the decline of the aspirations of high school students occurred in the 1990s to 2000s, it is thought that importance of school in the consciousness of students has declined. Furthermore, in the 2000s, a consumption culture enveloped students much more than it did in the 1970s. Student roles seem to have changed. Thus, I examine whether high school students may not fulfill student's responsibilities.

Hypothesis 2 b: Students' participation in the meritocracy has declined or been complicated.

The economic and social changes of the 1990s to 2000s have transfigured the transition from school to work. In Japan, the change from meritocracy to parentocracy, explicated by Brown (1995), has occurred (Mimizuka 2007). I examine student's participation in the meritocracy focused on the tracking.

2. Data and Questionnaire Items

1) Sample

This paper will use a data set from twelfth grade high school students (Area X) of JELS 2007. JELS 2007 is the second wave of surveys by JELS. Area X is a city with a population of about 250,000 people in the Kanto area. This data is suited for this paper because the data set includes schools from the top of the school hierarchy to the bottom.

2) Measurement

a. Track

In the Japanese school system, it is well known that the school hierarchy works as a track. I made an index of this track according to the following procedures. First, I distinguished the schools with a general course and the schools with a vocational course. Next, I set up the track of general course schools through school rank, as decided by the median of the students' junior high school marks for every school.

Four tracks: Full-Time General Course Upper, Middle, and Lower Schools, and Full-Time Vocational Course Schools

b. Student Culture and Behavior

—Commitment to School:

"I enjoy my current school life"

(Choose one of four choices: Strongly Agree - Agree - Disagree - Strongly Disagree)

—Delinquent Culture:

"I am interested in smoking"

(Choose one of four choices: Strongly Agree - Agree - Disagree - Strongly Disagree)

—Student Role:

“I remember the homeroom teacher’s full name”
(Choose one of four choices: Strongly Agree - Agree - Disagree - Strongly Disagree)

—Frequency of Lateness for School:

(Choose one of the following: Never, 1 - 2 times, 3 - 5 times, 6 - 10 times, 11 - 20 times, 21 - 30 times, 31 - 50 times, more than 50 times)

—Views on Success:

“Please select three factors that you think determine one’s success”
(Choose three of the following: Family background, one’s ability, one’s effort, a good degree, luck/opportunity, gender, one’s looks, one’s personal relationships/connections)

—Study Hours

“How many days per week do you study at home?”
(Choose one of the following: Almost every day, 4-5 days, 2-3 days, 1 day, never)

3. Results

Question 1: Is student culture different according to tracking (school hierarchy)?

In the items regarding commitment to school and delinquent culture, it was confirmed that there was a difference between tracks. Students in the higher track committed to the school culture more than low-ranking students did.

Question 2: What are the characteristics of student

culture and behavior in the 2000s?

Hypothesis 2 a: High school students may not fulfill student’s responsibilities.

In the item “I remember the homeroom teacher’s full name,” no significant difference was confirmed in the data about male and female students.

Next, I examined the item regarding the frequency of lateness for school. Male students in the higher track are late for school more often than those in the lower track. We should pay attention to the fact that lateness increased in a high-ranking school. Thirty-five percent of students are late more than 21 times.

Hypothesis 2 b: Student’s participation in the meritocracy declined or was complicated.

In this section, I focused on effort, which is one of the main concepts of meritocracy. The value of effort has been particularly emphasized in Japanese schools. I used the following measurements in my analysis: “How many days per week do you study at home?” and “Do you think effort is a important factor for success?” (These were multiple choice questions in the section “Views on Success.”) The former is an index of behavior and the latter is an index of consciousness.

Figure 2 shows, for the aspect of consciousness, students of “General Course Lower” and “Vocational Course” who placed in the lower track, who had more respect for the value of effort for success than the students in “General Course Higher.” In addition, the students in “General Course Higher” considered “a good degree” to be a key to success more than the student of the other tracks.

In contrast, Figure 3 shows, in the aspect of behavior, there are big differences among school hierarchies. The upper rank is above 70%, the middle rank is about 30%, and the lower rank is less than 10%. Thus, we

Table 1 Tracking and Student Culture (%)

		General Course Upper	General Course Middle	General Course Lower	Vocational Course
Male Students					
I enjoy my current school life	strongly agree	42.7	31.6	27.1	27.2
I am interested in smoking	strongly agree + agree	3.8	9.8	23.6	19.2
I remember the homeroom teacher’s full name	strongly agree + agree	60.2	56.8	60.0	66.2
The number of times late for school	More than 21 times	35.0	29.1	47.6	25.2
Female Students					
I enjoy my current school life	strongly agree	45.9	41.1	30.1	34.1
I am interested in smoking	strongly agree + agree	5.4	4.9	11.6	9.7
I remember the homeroom teacher’s full name	strongly agree + agree	70.3	67.0	68.0	64.9
The number of times late for school	More than 21 times	18.0	24.8	37.6	25.9

(JELS 2006)

Table 2 Views on Success (%)

	General Course Upper	General Course Middle	General Course Lower	Vocational Course	
Male Students					
	One's effort	67.0	70.0	83.1	77.6
	A good degree	34.0	30.9	14.5	13.6
Female Students					
	One's effort	72.7	74.7	77.8	84.2
	A good degree	34.5	20.1	17.0	6.5

Notes: Figure is the percentage of people who checked each item in the multiple answer survey. (JELS 2006)

Table 3 How many days per week do you study at home? (%)

	General Course Upper	General Course Middle	General Course Lower	Vocational Course	
Male Students					
	Almost every day	72.8	40.2	2.9	2.0
	4-5 days	11.7	11.5	1.8	2.6
	2-3 days	4.9	12.0	8.2	8.6
	1 days	1.9	3.8	11.2	9.3
	0 days	7.8	32.1	75.9	77.5
Female Students					
	Almost every day	75.7	24.4	2.9	0.0
	4-5 days	9.0	9.3	2.9	3.8
	2-3 days	6.3	15.2	9.2	8.6
	1 days	2.7	9.6	12.7	15.7
	0 days	5.4	41.1	71.1	71.4

(JELS 2006)

can see that the higher each school's rank is, the harder its students study.

4. Conclusion and Discussion

1) Nowadays, there was a difference between tracks in the school hierarchy. A basic finding by Mimizuka Hiroaki (1980) was reconfirmed.

2) It is thought that the social and cultural order of schools in the 2000s has changed since the 1970s. The fundamental performance of students' responsibilities has declined in the present era.

3) The manner of participation in meritocracy is more complicated. In the Japanese meritocracy, it is well

known that effort is highly valued. Kariya (2000) mentioned that, through the study of student's study hours, the decline of effort was remarkable in the students at lower positions in the social stratification. It is well known in the field of education sociology that there are many students in the lower positions of social stratification among the lower-ranked schools.

Through this analysis, we can highlight the gap in effort between behavior and consciousness. Higher ranked students respect effort more than lower ranked students. In fact, they do make more effort more than lower ranked students. This result leads to the following question: Is the value of effort declining at Japanese schools in which effort has been emphasized?

Higher ranked students may not commit to the culture of effort. Namely, they make an effort to study at

the behavioral level, while it seems that they withdraw from the effort-oriented school culture.

In addition, the following question comes to mind: Why do lower ranked students study less, even though they claim to respect effort? It is possible that students have a pessimistic view of their future prospects, and they believe that they will not be able to succeed even if they make an effort to study.

References

- Brown, P. (1995). "Cultural capital and social exclusion" in *Work, employment and society*, No. 9, 29-51.
- Hargreaves D. H. (1967). *Social relations in a secondary school*, Routledge & Regan Paul
- Iwaki H. and Mimizuka H., et al. (1983). "Kokosei: Gakko kakusa no nakade [High school students: In the differential of school]" *Gendai no Esprit [Esprit Today]* vol. 195 (Originally in Japanese)
- Mimizuka H. (1980). "A Study of the Polarization of Student Subcultures in High School", *The journal of educational sociology* Vol. 35 pp. 111-122 (Originally in Japanese)
- Mimizuka, H. (2007). "Darega Gakuryoku wo kakutoku surunoka (Who does obtain the academic ability?)" in

Mimizuka, H. Makino, K (ed.) *Gakuryoku to Transition no kiki (The crisis of academic ability and transition from school to work)* pp. 3-23 (Originally in Japanese)

Kariya T. (2000). "A Study of Study Hours: In Equality of Efforts in a Meritocracy", *The journal of educational sociology* Vol. 27 pp. 213-229 (Originally in Japanese)

Takeuchi K. (1972). "Seito no kaibunka wo megutte [About subculture of high school student]", *The journal of educational sociology* Vol. 27 pp. 173-378 (Originally in Japanese)

Acknowledgements

This is a part of the results of the Japan Education Longitudinal Study (JELS).

This paper is a revised version of a paper prepared for presentation at the Conference of the Asia Pacific Educational Research Association in Singapore, November 2008.

Author Note

Naoki OTAWA

Assistant Professor, Center for research and development of higher education, the university of Tokyo.

E-mail: jelsocha@cc.ocha.ac.jp

URL: http://www.li.ocha.ac.jp/hss/edusci/mimizuka/JELS_HP/index.htm