

REPORT FROM THE FIELD

ACADEMIC PRESSURE AND IMPACT ON JAPANESE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT. This paper explores the intense pressure endured by Japanese students, according to much published evidence, in the pursuit of academic achievement, especially in the university entrance examination. The paper provides a discussion of the literature and examines cultural, social, and economic factors for such pressure. It then considers the impact of academic pressure on students' psychological and physical well-being, including the serious problems of bullying and school-related suicide. In sum, the paper calls attention to the overwhelming pressures faced by Japanese students and seeks to provide a basis of understanding for further research.

RÉSUMÉ. Cet article porte sur les vives tensions que les impératifs de la réussite scolaire imposent, selon de nombreuses publications, aux étudiants japonais et particulièrement aux candidats qui se présentent aux examens d'entrée à l'université. L'auteur analyse les publications consacrées à cette question et examine les facteurs culturels, sociaux et économiques qui renforcent ces tensions. Il examine également les répercussions de ces tensions sur le bien-être psychologique et physique des étudiants et notamment les graves problèmes que sont l'intimidation et le suicide lié à des pressions scolaires. En bref, l'article met en lumière les tensions énormes que vivent les étudiants japonais et tente de jeter les fondements de recherches plus fouillées.

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the intense pressure faced by students in Japan, especially those in high school. Special attention is given to the university entrance examination because of its tremendous impact on students' lives. A reading of the relevant literature reveals many pressures from a variety of sources which include parents, teachers, peers and society. The literature reveals that pressures on the students are multi-dimensional (i.e., psychological, emotional, intellectual, and physical) and are manifested in various ways. Included in the paper are recent facts and figures that illuminate the serious recurring problems of bullying and school-related suicide, and their connection to academic pressure.

Background

My interest in this subject was first ignited upon learning of the phenomenon referred to as “examination hell” (Rohlen, 1983; Ogura, 1987; Young, 1993, etc.), a very intriguing, complicated and often disturbing way of life for many students in Japan. Despite this phenomenon, the test results of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) and the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) indicate that Japanese children score among the best in the world in math and science (Robitaille & Garden, 1989; Postlethwaite & Wiley, 1991; Pelgrum & Plomp, 1993; Stevenson, 1998). An intellectual/emotional paradox appears to coexist within the lives of students. I found it perplexing that a society could apparently provide the support and resources that resulted in the outstanding academic achievement of its students and at the same time, according to many accounts, both collective and individual, create a “hellish” environment that hurt many children’s health.

What followed were two years of qualitative study of Japanese culture and its educational system. My study of Japanese education and the consequences of “examination hell” included a wide range of materials such as government reports from the Japanese Ministry of Education, information from academic journals, books, magazines and Japanese newspapers. All data for the present paper are secondary material, but I chose to use this approach to gain a broad understanding of the multiple influences and the impact of academic pressure on students. I wanted, moreover, to find out whether the contexts and consequences of examination hell were more than merely recent or isolated cases.

I have also collected substantial data directly from Japanese students through semi-structured interviews and questionnaires as well as from many informal discussions with students who completed their secondary education in Japan. That material has contributed to my understanding of the lives of Japanese students and is a foundation of the present analysis; it will be examined in depth and more directly in a subsequent paper.

Focus and limitations of this study.

This is, admittedly, a Western view of a Japanese phenomenon (I have not lived or studied in Japan) but has a certain contribution to make, I believe, in introducing some Western readers to this phenomenon, and in collecting and analyzing perspectives on the pressures of that educational system. My paper may also have some value in a comparative sense as Western countries are currently focussing great attention on achieving ever-higher academic standards. I acknowledge that this paper does not attempt to offer a balanced view by dwelling equally on the successes of the Japanese education system; these, however, have been amply documented elsewhere. I must also note that the beginnings of change are beginning to be felt to counteract the

worst side-effects of “examination hell.” The Japanese government has very recently introduced educational reforms such as training teachers to deal with children’s distress and providing increased flexibility in entrance requirements for university. However, many students still suffer as a result of fierce competition and excessive pressure, high expectations and a challenging curriculum. While some may excel in such circumstances, many experience severe anxiety and even more serious consequences, as I will discuss below.

Examination Hell; the root of pressure

Japan has placed a high value on education for many centuries. Despite its turbulent history and the vast changes to its educational system over the years, the importance of education has remained constant. In Japan, it is hardly an exaggeration to say that school is the most important time in a child’s life and that success (i.e., academic achievement) is all that matters.

In 1872, the Meiji government introduced a public educational system that made higher education accessible to anyone who was intelligent enough to qualify. The university entrance examination was created as a means of catching up with the West. The government also believed that the examination would reflect Japan’s meritocratic and egalitarian ideals. The entrance examination became the sole instrument by which all students were measured. Tokyo University became the pinnacle of academic achievement and the gateway to future success. Only the most intelligent students were admitted and upon graduation were rewarded with the best jobs. Since then, many universities have followed suit. All the universities in Japan are ranked according to excellence and students are admitted on the basis of their performance on the entrance examination. The university entrance examination is the gatekeeper that provides access to and ultimately determines students’ future success and status. The university that a student attends is most often the sole criterion that employers consider in their decision to hire a potential candidate.

The Japanese educational system places all its eggs in one basket—the university entrance examination. The life-long consequences of students’ performance on this examination are far reaching. The same can be said for students who pursue a private high school education that exempts them from a university entrance examination. They are subject to the high stakes of the high school entrance exam.

Applicants to national and public universities and some private universities must take the Joint First-Stage Achievement Test (JFSAT) and the university’s own entrance exam. This makes for a heavier workload and greater burden on students (Frost, 1992). It is also important to note that the structure and substance of entrance examinations are considerably different between public and private universities. The typical entrance exam to a private or national university consists mainly of multiple choice questions.

Preparation for this exam requires a great deal of rote learning. On the other hand, the entrance examination to public university usually consists of essay type questions, and preparation involves much less memorization by students.

It is important to be aware of the admission process of all students to all types of schools and to understand the significance and importance of attending prestigious academic institutions. In urban areas, private junior high, high schools and universities are more prestigious than their public counterparts, with the exception of a small handful of elite schools such as the national university. Students who enter a private junior high school automatically enter its affiliated high school. In some cases, students can go straight through to a private university without writing an entrance exam. Entry to this accelerated system can occur as early as kindergarten, but in all cases an entrance examination is required at the level of entry. Applicants to any private school must pass the institution's entrance examination, and in all cases students' grade point average (GPA) is not considered in the admission process. However, students from private or public schools can be recommended by teachers to a private university on the basis of their GPA, but they still must write an entrance examination for the particular university. In most cases, students are awarded entry.

In rural areas it is almost the opposite. Public education is more prestigious than private. Entrance to public junior high school is based on students' GPA, and admission to public high school is based on students' GPA and performance on an entrance exam. Admission to a public university is based solely on students' performance on the entrance examination.

Since general knowledge and ability, high school record, and other factors all take a back seat to examinations scores, the pressures for a student to employ stratagems to improve a score even slightly are enormous. (Leestma & Walberg, 1992, p. 272)

Many students attend *juku* (i.e., after class private study) to keep up with the demanding pace of classrooms and to remain at par with their fellow classmates. But more importantly, most students attend *juku* to help them prepare for the entrance examinations to high-school and university. "Some *juku* specialize in particular universities' entrance exams, and they will boast of their rate of admission into their universities" (White, 1984, p. 98). According to an Education Ministry Survey released in July 1994, 24 percent of elementary school students and 67 percent of junior high school students study at *juku*. *Juku* enrollment among all age groups has increased sharply since the previous survey in 1985. The most notable increase is among junior high school students whose rates jumped from 47 to 67 percent. The survey also shows that both elementary and junior high school students attend *juku* 2 days a week (*Japan Times*, July 30, 1994, p. 3).

Satoshi Takahashi's experience is not uncommon.

[He] started working in earnest to prepare for college in the fourth grade. That year he was enrolled in three *juku* and went to supplementary classes seven days a week. Now he attends only two *juku* for five days a week so that he can devote Tuesdays and Thursdays to studying for the special school he attends on Sundays. (Random, 1985, p. 26)

Furthermore, The Japanese Ministry of Health and Welfare White Paper recently stated:

Upon examining the daily schedule for elementary and middle school students, we find that the average weekday time used for school work and commuting to school is 8 hours and 15 minutes for elementary school students and 10 hours and 10 minutes for middle school students. Excluding sleep time, these figures amount to 54.0% and 62.0% of their daily schedules. In other words, more than half of their daily schedules are devoted to school work (Section 6, 1998).

Success in school means one thing – access to a top-ranked university. Access to a top-ranked university is a one-time opportunity that is determined by students' performance on the entrance examination. Their life-long potential for social mobility, economic security and employment opportunity, not to mention their self-esteem and emotional well-being, in other words, their 'quality of life' depend on this one examination. White (1984) reiterates this significant point:

It is important to note that in Japan there really is only one moment of critical importance to one's career chances – the entrance examination to college. There are few opportunities to change paths or retool. Americans' belief that one can be recreated at any time in life, that the self-made person can get ahead, simply is not possible in Japan – thus the intense focus on examinations. (p. 99, emphasis added)

This single-minded drive for achievement results in what many refer to as examination hell (Rohlen, 1983; Ogura, 1987, and Young, 1993). The entrance examination is the root of all pressure placed on students. It is the primary mechanism responsible for driving competition. The implications of students' performance are far reaching. Not only does the students' performance affect their own future, it determines the future status and careers of their teachers, school, and most importantly, their family. As a result, the pressures that are exerted upon students to achieve are overwhelming. Although the adverse effects of Japan's university entrance examination have long been recognized, this system of funneling the top students to top jobs persists in determining students' entire futures.

In the pursuit of academic success, students experience a multitude of pressures from a variety of sources.

Pressure from society

Despite the popular Western conception of Japan as a homogeneous society, the Japanese people recognize many differences among themselves and, as

in other nations, many people hold prejudices based on a person's occupational status, ethnicity, class, gender, and most importantly – education. Because the prejudices are built into the social hierarchy, students experience tremendous social pressure to succeed in school.

Although the Japanese culture consists of regional and generational differences, a distinctive feature is the extent of concern for uniformity (Beauchamp, 1992). The majority of society shares the same values and ideas of appropriate behavior and place high value on education. The Japanese culture emphasizes personal traits such as loyalty, perseverance, and sacrifice.

Japanese society imposes high expectations on all students. Competition begins at an early age. It stems from the close relationship between school, work, and the quality of life. Success in school promises a higher quality lifestyle, both economically and socially, yet not all students succeed. Although Japan has one of the highest rates of college attendance in the world at almost 40 percent, the College Entrance Examination Center in Tokyo, whose examination results are used by the vast majority of post-secondary institutions, reveals the following competition ratio statistics: 5 students competed for every one opening in national universities, 9.7 students competed for every one opening in public universities, and 10.6 students competed for every one opening in private universities (JMOE, 1994c).

A shrinking job market, a 22 consecutive monthly decline of full-time job holders and a near record high unemployment rate of 4.6% (*Japan Times*, Nov. 27 – Dec. 3, 1999) have given Japanese businesses a larger pool of student-recruits to choose from. Students' educational credentials are more important than ever in securing a good job. The university that a student attends is the basis that employers use to decide employment, and access to a top-ranked university depends entirely upon students' achievement on the entrance examination. "Entrance exams thus obviously serve as crucial screening devices for employers" (Rohlen, 1983, p. 90).

In brief, Japanese students live in a social context where conformity is expected, students strive for high academic achievement, and employers hire employees based on the university they attend.

Pressure from parents

Confucian philosophy is deeply embedded in the Japanese culture. Ideas such as the hierarchical nature of human relations, children's deep respect for their parents, loyalty, patriotism and the pursuit of learning are fundamental convictions that pervade Japanese society.

The concept of *groupism* is one that dates back many centuries in the Japanese culture. Groupism postulates that each group member is responsi-

ble for all other members. Thus, cooperation is essential to the success of this dynamic concept. Individualism is frowned upon while interdependence is encouraged and fostered at school and at home. The group bears the brunt of individual failures and basks in the glory of individual accomplishments.

Japanese children belong to many groups simultaneously. Communities, schools, classrooms, teams, friends and families are all interconnected. Of all these, the 'family' integrates individual members of society in the most intimate way. In Japanese families, although fathers are considered the head of the household and exert a strong influence on their children's desire for success, mothers usually assume most of the responsibility for their family's education. Children's respect and devotion to the family is exemplified by their efforts to meet the family goal. Japanese families may have many goals, but the academic achievement of their children is by far their foremost priority.

Japanese mothers have been called 'education mothers'. They take their children's education very seriously. Stevenson (1990) remarks, "Japanese mothers are unrelenting in their self-sacrifice and dedication to their children" (p. 99). They diligently help their children with homework, ensure them the time and place for studying, provide supplementary texts and courses, employ tutors and actively participate in parent-teacher meetings.

The importance of children's success in school and its impact on the family creates a strong bond and interdependence between mother and child that virtually swallows up the mother's identity. She 'is' what her child achieves. Her self-satisfaction as well as her status in the community is directly related to her children's academic achievement. Iga (1986) explains that:

Their (i.e., Japanese mothers) pressure upon their children is strengthened by sex prejudice. The lack of opportunity for self-development for most Japanese women, their husbands' neglect of their needs, and social pressure for self-restraint combine to channel their hope and energy into their children's education and success. (p. 192, brackets added)

This supports White's (1993) claim that "... mothers tend to promote their son's educational futures more than those of their daughters, even though the number of girls entering college is about equal to that of boys" (p. 61).

Investment in their children's' education is a very high priority for Japanese parents. Educational expenses such as juku, private tutors, and related materials account for 15.8 percent of consumer spending by Japanese households, more than 5 times that spent in the United States (*Japan Times*, September 18, 1994, p. 3). Parents are willing to sacrifice other needs for those of their children's education. It is not uncommon for families to make do on simple meals and other basic needs in order to provide their children with whatever they need pertaining to their education. Such sacrifices illustrate the family goal for the academic success of their children.

In return for mothers' efforts and family sacrifices children are expected to work hard and consistently obtain high grades. Unlike the drastic measures that are often taken by Chinese parents to ensure their child's motivation and academic achievement (see Lin, 1995), Japanese parents avoid physically disciplining their children. They believe that their children's motivation should come from a sense of obligation to the family and guilt if they are failing (Hendry, 1995). Children realize the impact of their success or failure on the family. The family's name, reputation (especially those from intellectual backgrounds), social and economic status, and the mother's identity all fall on the shoulders of children. Academic success rewards families with fame, high social status, economic security and honor, while failure means low family status, economic hardship, and family shame. Many Japanese children thus experience tremendous pressures along the way and are driven by an obligation that neglects their individual needs and restricts their childhood experiences.

Pressure from Teachers

Schools, principals and teachers naturally play an important role in children's education. Japanese teachers are held in high esteem. "For centuries, the term used for teacher – *sensei* – has denoted a position honored by all Japanese" (Stevenson, 1991, p. 113). Teachers are also rewarded with job security and a good salary that is equivalent to other professionals with the same educational background.

Japanese education is teacher-centered. Teachers typically deliver information through a lecture format while students sit, listen, and write. The students are passive learners who adopt memorization as the primary technique for acquiring knowledge. Most teachers feel they have little time to provide students with all the information they will need to pass the university entrance examination. Although the exam may be many years away, no time is wasted in preparing students for this crucial moment. From the day that children begin to go to school, they are bombarded with information that they will need to know to pass the entrance examination. Learning is a continuous cycle of listening, writing, and memorizing.

Japanese pedagogy (and maternal socialization) are based on the belief that effort is the most important factor in achievement, and that the teacher's job is to get the child to commit himself positively and energetically to hard work. (White, 1984, p. 97).

Teachers take this responsibility very seriously. "Cooperation among teachers is a hallmark of Japanese education" (Stevenson, 1991, p. 114). It is a sense of shared responsibility that brings teachers together. They frequently consult with one another on matters of technique, preparation, and materials. Teachers believe it is their personal, professional, and patriotic duty to

fulfill their responsibilities. They are also aware that the academic achievement of their students will reflect their abilities as a teacher and affect their professional status and ascent within the educational hierarchy.

The fact that Japanese schools are without psychologists, social workers, and counselors is a major reason why teachers feel responsible not only for students' academic agendas, but for their behavior, morality, social activity, and discipline. Being a teacher in Japan is a round-the-clock job. Teachers frequently consult with parents on matters about their child's study habits as well as their recreational activities. It is not uncommon for a teacher to visit the home of a student and speak with the family. "Parents invariably request that teachers make their children work harder, keep up the pressure, and teachers can not deny the importance of study" (White, 1993, p. 85).

Teachers exert a tremendous influence among the families of their students. Parents usually follow any recommendation made by their child's teacher, regardless of how extreme it may be. Teachers often use this influence to assert control over their students. Many go too far. Accounts of examination hell and the stresses it places on children, families, and teachers are well documented (Cummings, 1980; Rohlen, 1983; and Vogel, 1979).

Most teachers believe that they are not only within their right, but that it is their responsibility to do whatever is necessary to ensure the academic success of their students. They even feel that their responsibility is in many ways above the law. Teachers wield tremendous social and political power. For this reason, the law tends to be lenient toward abusive teachers. Aware of their power and influence, some teachers use it to intimidate and manipulate students.

The violent behavior of teachers and the attitude of principals and the judicial system regarding such incidents is a disturbing problem. During the 1994-95 school year, there were 257 cases of disciplinary action against teachers for the physical abuse of students that resulted in 386 teachers receiving disciplinary measures. This marks an increase of 52 more teachers from the previous year (JMOE, 1995). The 1993 ruling of a teacher who slammed a 500 pound steel gate into the face of a 15-year-old student, killing her instantly, highlights this point. The court found the teacher guilty of involuntary manslaughter and sentenced him to one year in prison and to three years of probation, and then suspended his sentence because the court believed that he had suffered enough by being fired (Young, 1993).

Although corporal punishment is illegal in Japan, as stated in the School Education Law, article 11, it is still commonly practiced as a means of disciplining students. In the 1994-95 school year, a total of 241 students suffered physical injury from teacher abuse. The type of injuries included

bruises, lacerations, nose bleeds, ear injuries, fractures, and others (JMOC, 1995).

In sum, teachers exert pressure upon students by using their high social status and influence with parents to control students' lives. Student behaviors are closely scrutinized by teachers who believe that everything that a student does must in some way lead towards academic achievement. Consequently, students are under-the-thumb of teachers who do whatever it takes, including physical abuse, to guarantee students' academic success. Although most students respect their teachers, many also fear them.

Pressure from peers

Japanese classmates assume some responsibility for each other's education. The class is viewed as a group. The notion of groupism calls on students to help the class to succeed. The bright students often assist those in need. Although this is meant to help the slower students, it accentuates competition and creates enormous peer pressure. The prospect of falling behind worries most students. This in turn drives competition.

As a result of affiliation and mutual identification, peer groups are typically very close. Members frequently communicate with each other, even on matters outside of the group agenda, and often remain friends for many years. The pressure to conform to cultural values is a frequent concern of many junior high and high school students. Peer groups patrol for signs of nonconformity in others. A person whose actions revolve around group interests is thought to have a high moral character. Students who deviate from this value often become victims of bullying.

The notions of success and failure are not clear-cut as most Westerners might expect. For example, if a student far exceeds the class average on an exam, the student is not looked up to. Rather, he or she is likely to lose the respect of the other students and be ostracized by the class for making them look inferior. When a Japanese person succeeds, it is very important for that person to defuse jealousy and resentment and not cause others embarrassment or to lose face, otherwise their success is viewed more as a failure of respect for others. "The competitive impetus is not to get ahead but to try 'not to be behind others' " (Ogura, 1987, p. 8). Therefore, many Japanese students must delicately balance success with concern for others around them. It is a difficult task for a student to anticipate the performance of others and restrict their own performance toward marginal success, yet this dilemma is frequently faced by some Japanese children. And although problematic, losing face is a cultural taboo that Japanese people will avoid inflicting on others and on themselves.

On the other hand, admission to a top ranked university takes priority over all other student concerns. Many students, like teachers, will do whatever

is necessary to ensure their success. Some students resort to physical intimidation as a means of eliminating the competition. Average students sometimes target brighter ones in acts of bullying with the hope that their aggression will frighten and distract brighter students from their studies.

Negative impact

When students reach the secondary level, an extreme emphasis on entrance examination material takes over and students must keep up with demanding studies that govern their lives. Although the entrance examination system has positive aspects that reflect the Japanese culture and has contributed to students' very high performance on comparative international examinations (Husen, 1967; Comber & Keeves, 1973; Robitaille & Garden, 1989; Postlethwaite & Wiley, 1991; and Pelgrum & Plomp, 1993), the literature suggests that the demerits of this system may offset the advantages (see Frost, 1992; Iga, 1986; JNPD, 1993; Ogura, 1987; White, 1993; and Young, 1993).

Japanese secondary students are deprived of many intellectual experiences. A significant reliance on rote learning hinders other facets of their cognitive development. The focus of learning through memorization may inhibit the development of critical and analytic thinking skills, creativity, and imagination.

Fierce competition has led some students, as well as adults, to cheat. In some cases, parents not only accept their children's dishonest behavior, they actively assist them in cheating. On one occasion, a father disguised himself as his daughter and attempted to write the examination in her place (White, 1987).

Cheating in Japanese universities is not uncommon. Some students copy each other's homework and use blatant as well as subtle techniques to share and copy answers for questions during tests. Furthermore, although secondary schools consider cheating as a serious offense, most universities brush it off as an inconsequential act. Administrators and teachers tend to turn a blind eye toward cheating because they know that students' futures have already been decided upon by the name of the university that they attend. This attitude perpetuates academic dishonesty, destroys motivation, and ultimately hurts students' chances of learning while in university.

The examination system may undermine students' interest in the intrinsic rewards of learning. The low caliber of university education is often attributed to the negative impact of the examination system on students' motivation. (Leestma & Walberg, 1992)

The psychological impact of the pressures that students have to endure at home, in school and in the society is great. Students are very aware of the efforts and sacrifices that others make on their behalf. They are also keenly

aware of their mother's deepest wish and the extent to which the family status falls on their shoulders. They realize that their academic performance has a direct impact on all concerned, especially themselves. Most students are grateful to everyone who assists in their efforts to succeed and feel a deep responsibility to reciprocate those efforts by achieving high grades. This tremendous sense of debt drives many students to persevere. However, it is also what drives many to uncharacteristic violent behavior, and even suicide. For many, the load is too heavy.

Psychological harm comes to many Japanese children at an early age. Stevenson (1990) notes, "By the fifth grade, Japanese children begin to indicate some dislike for school, a lack of confidence about their future, and a rather pessimistic view of themselves" (p. 99). Stevenson's (1990) research also found that Japanese mothers rated their children as the least likely to show self-confidence, and the most likely to be shy and anxious compared to American and Chinese mother's assessments.

White (1987) recalls how the psychological impact of academic pressures caused one student to experience a nervous breakdown:

In 1984 a sixth grader taking an entrance examination into Nerd, one of the country's most prestigious secondary schools, experienced a "nervous breakdown" during the exam and had to be taken out by ambulance—a failure at the age of twelve. It turned out that he had been very well prepared indeed, but that his state of anxiety was such that seeing the actual exam triggered total loss of control. (p. 142-143)

Other examination stories include students soiling their pants, as well as violent outbursts. White (1987) claims that "the existence of the exams, and the increasing number of children who at younger and younger ages sit for them, have produced an explosion of intense anxiety" (p. 172). Many secondary students taking the university entrance examination share the same psychological trauma.

White (1993) cites a 1990 Report on Children's Health by Nippon College of Physical Education that surveyed over twelve hundred schools from nursery to senior high school levels from which she based the following:

School-related health problems among Japanese children are on the increase, according to recent reports from children's hospitals in Japan. There has been a rise in the incidence of stomach ulcers, a rise in allergy disorders among children, including rashes and asthma, and some abnormal cholesterol levels and high blood pressure. Low ability to concentrate and hyperactivity are also reported. Children also report sleeplessness, backaches, and low energy levels. The researchers mentioned greater stress on children as well as ignorance of parents who do not sufficiently recognize the physical and emotional environment of today's schools. (p. 86)

The psychological impact of pressures on students manifests itself in many ways. The result of academic pressures has led many to truancy in the hope of escape. Truancy, school phobia or school refusal syndrome (*tokokyohi*) are problems that increased dramatically in the early 1990s. According to an Education Ministry Report, a record 75,000 elementary and junior high school students deliberately skipped at least 30 days of school in fiscal 1993 (*Japan Statistical Yearbook, 1993/94*). Although the actual number of absent students is higher in lower secondary schools than in elementary schools, lower secondary schools marked an increase of 55 percent while elementary schools demonstrated an increase of more than 250 percent (*Japan Statistical Yearbook, 1993/94*).

The number of elementary and junior high school children who were frequently truant during the 1998-99 school year jumped by more than 20 percent from the previous year, according to a government report on juvenile problems released Friday. The report by the Management and Coordination Agency says the number of students who were truant at least 30 days in elementary schools reached 26,017 during the 1998-99 school year. The number was up 25.3 percent from the 1997-98 school year. In junior high schools, the number of frequent truants was 101,675, up 20.0 percent. The agency blamed the trend on the growing access youth have to "uncensored harmful information," telephone chat services and private karaoke cubicles. (*Japan Times, Jan. 14, 2000*)

The article failed to mention that by not attending school, students avoid the peer pressures, the difficulties and often the perils that come with the pressure to succeed and the threat of being bullied.

School-related violence takes on many forms in Japan. It is a recurring social problem that all too often concludes with death. Incidents of domestic violence have been attributed to the extreme pressures faced by students. Wolferen (1990) argues that although *shiken jigoku* (i.e., examination hell) is not the major cause of death among school-age children, he does acknowledge that "aberrations in personality development and difficulties in parent-child relations are undoubtedly aggravated by chronic exam anxiety" (p. 88).

Bullying and suicide

Academic pressures prompt many students to vent their frustration, sense of hopelessness, stress or anger in a very destructive manner. Bullying and suicide are two outlets for such overwhelming emotions.

In 1985, school-related violence was so frequent and widespread throughout Japan that the Ministry of Education established a committee on *ijime* (i.e., bullying) to study this phenomenon. Prior to 1994, the Ministry defined bullying as harassment among students that is acknowledged by authorities. "In one six-month period in the mid-1980s, 150,000 cases of bullying were

reported to school authorities" (Young, 1993, p. 132). Today, the number of reported cases involving bullying is not nearly as high as it once was during the mid-Eighties.

In 1995, the Ministry redefined bullying as:

An intermittent and one-sided physical or psychological attack by an aggressor against a victim which causes the victim to suffer seriously. Bullying can occur inside or outside of school, and whether an incident is bullying or not depends on the victim's feeling of recognition as such. This determination should not be made by a formal investigation of each case, but by looking at the incident from the students' perspective. (JMOE, 1995)

In the 1993/94 school year, a total number of 21,598 cases of bullying were reported. In the 1994/95 school year, using the new definition, a total number of 56,601 cases of bullying were reported (JMOE, 1995). Although the Ministry's new definition appears more sensitive to victims of bullying, it will be difficult to track and determine any progress because of the newly inflated numbers.

Why do students bully others? Possible explanations are found in students' pride, ego, and frustration, much of which is shaped and caused by academic pressure. And although the typical victim of bullying is someone who does not conform to traditional Japanese values, and is usually perceived as a weak person, bullies do not always discriminate. Manoru Tsuchiya, who leads therapy groups for truant students, states:

Any student can become the victim of bullying . . . One cause of bullying is accumulated stress in an examination oriented education system represented by "hensachi", or deviation value, in Japanese education. Some students find targets and assault them in an attempt to ease the stress. (*Japan Times*, May 21, 1994, p.3)

Iga (1986) argues that despite the emphasis on groupism, Japanese people may be very egocentric. He states:

In the pursuit of success and fame, egocentric persons are inclined to use others, including friends and family members. This attitude hurts social relations. Intimacy is difficult to cultivate. The lack of intimacy makes a person more aggressive in his search for attention. . . . (p. 194)

Iwai (1974) presents a quote from a delinquent student that provides some insight into his thinking. The boy said:

I'm stupid, so whatever I do I get into trouble with the teachers. I don't like being the underdog, so I take it out on people around me. I was being determined not to be looked down on and that made me this way. (p. 387 cited in Cummings, 1980)

A recent article in the *Japan Times* (Nov. 27-Dec. 3, 1999) illustrates that bullying can lead to more serious offences such as extortion or the most tragic extreme.

Police arrested seven boys between the ages of 17 and 18 on Nov. 29 on suspicion of kicking and beating to death a 17-year-old former class mate two days earlier in Gunma Prefecture. The seven admitted to killing Tomohiro Suwa, a second-year student at a prefectural high school, because he would not pay them money.

Ministry officials are quick to point out the progress that they have made in their campaign to combat school bullying. However, it is difficult if not impossible to determine the exact number of incidents and study any change. How many cases go unreported? In a society that demands conformity, how many victims believe that they “had it coming” and remain silent? How many victims withhold reporting incidents in fear that it will only make matters worse? How many authorities (e.g., teachers and principals) dismiss students’ claims of bullying to protect the reputation of the school? How many students define bullying as requiring physical abuse and do not report incidents of verbal torment? How many children simply accept being bullied as a part of growing-up? Until these questions are answered it is impossible to know the extent of this tragic social problem that is robbing children of their most basic need—the need to feel safe.

The connection between suicide and the entrance examination system is self-evident. It has been frequently treated as the main cause of youth suicide (Vogel, 1979; Wolferen, 1990; Iga, 1986; Arthur, 1990; Pinguet, 1993; Beauchamp, 1994).

The pressure on the individual student becomes so great that it probably is even reflected in the suicide curve, which has a life-cycle maximum for both sexes at the age of university examinations and an annual maximum for boys in the month the results of the examinations are known. (Beauchamp, 1994, p. 207-8)

A report by Japan’s National Police Agency notes the connection between teenage suicide and academic pressure. The report concludes that the vast majority of suicides among this age group are attributed to strained interpersonal relations with friends and family, poor scholastic achievement, and failure in entrance exams (Japanese National Police Department, 1993). Iga’s (1986) research in this area recognizes the extent to which educational pressures preclude teenage suicide.

Some students concede failure even before the entrance examination and chose what they believe to be their only alternative. One eighteen-year-old boy wrote:

I thank you for taking care of me for a long time. I have been in a slump the past month and did not study. I don’t know why, but I am not in the mood to study. It is impossible in this condition to pass the entrance examination, which is coming in about a month. I gave up hope of passing the examination. I give up. I have decided to die. (Iga, 1986, p. 39)

The Japanese youth suicide rate is a tragic problem. Considering the long lasting emotional scars on victims of bullying and the psychological impact on students who fail the university entrance examination or who end up at a lowly ranked university as a result of their performance, data on young adults between 15 and 24 years old is certainly pertinent. In 1991, 1,333 cases of suicide fell into this age group (*Japan Statistical Yearbook*, 1993/94). The suicide rate for this age group in 1993 was 10 per 100,000 (WHO, 1994). Current data reveal that suicide among Japanese children is on the rise (*Japan Times*, Nov. 27-Dec. 3, 1999).

Police said July 1 that the number of suicides surged 35 percent in 1998 to a record high 32,863, surpassing 30,000 for the first time. The total included 17 elementary school kids, up from 12 the previous year; 102 junior high school students, up 40; and 220 high school students, an increase of 51.

The status difference among top-ranked universities is enough to cause students to commit suicide. A paragraph from a suicide note written by a Kyoto university student reads:

The only significance of life is to enter Tokyo University, which is the best in Japan. When I entered Kyoto University, students and professors here looked so inferior to those in Tokyo. The fact that I entered this university worsened my nervous condition, contrary to my mother's expectations. I could not be proud of being a student here. (Iga, 1986, p. 41)

A recent survey by the Japanese Ministry of Health and Welfare found data that illustrate the importance that parents place on their children's grades and admission to a highly ranked university. The study found that parents' greatest fear surrounding child rearing was most often "related to studies and entrance into schools of a higher grade" (Section 6, 1998). Parents' fear for their children's academic failure very likely contributes to the pressures imposed upon students.

"School problems, especially bullying and hazing, may create intolerable pressure and even lead in some cases either to violence by the oppressed child, or suicide" (White, 1993, p. 163). Excessive bullying is to blame for many child suicides. A 1986 suicide note left behind by Hirofumi Shikagawa read, "I don't want to die, but going on like this is a living hell" (*Japan Times*, May 21, 1994, p. 3). Shikagawa's death attracted world-wide attention to the severity of bullying in Japanese schools during the mid 1980s. A front page story in the *Japan Times* (May 21, 1994) brought news that the Tokyo High Court overturned a lower court decision and ruled that Shikagawa's suicide was a direct result of the bullying inflicted by his classmates. The Court ordered his school and the parents of his classmates to pay ¥11.5 million in damages.

Conclusion

Given the scope of the literature and the numerous accounts of academic pressure, it is clear that many Japanese students experience tremendous hardship. Although parents are willing to make the necessary sacrifices for their children's education, I believe that many are ignorant to the depth of harm that they expose their children. Furthermore, even parents are sensitive to their children's plight may believe that there is no choice. Teachers also contribute to students' pressures by assuming multiple roles and sometimes becoming frightening disciplinary figures. However, it is the Japanese society and its culture that is perhaps the most stringent and overwhelming source of pressure. As long as the students with the highest grades continue to be rewarded by society and those who do not score as high are punished and have no alternative means to secure a prosperous life and honour for themselves and their families, examination hell seems inevitable. Meanwhile, many students suffer psychological, social, emotional, and physical harm.

This study shares some of the documented cases surrounding bullying and school related suicide that occur as a result of academic pressure. These cases are not uncommon or isolated incidents. They are much more than recurring social problems that plague Japanese education. They are tragedies that are robbing children of their youth and a nation of its most precious resource, its children. Although the government and the courts may be serious in their resolve at curbing students' suffering, solutions thus far remain elusive.

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Academic Pressure and Impact on Japanese Students

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