

EDUCATION REFORM AND EQUAL OPPORTUNITY IN JAPAN¹

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ABSTRACT: *Recently, there have been concerns that equality of educational opportunity has been lost and that this is leading to the stratification of Japanese society through the widening of income differentials, in a “gap society”. In such a disparity society, secure full-time jobs are increasingly becoming limited to those who graduate from prestigious universities, and entry into those institutions is becoming connected more clearly with family income and investments. Parental attitudes towards their children taking extra lessons after school, going to cram schools, getting into university, and getting into a relatively highly-ranked university have influenced educational costs. This article examines the historical formation of the concept of equality of opportunity, which has been applied to the educational policy in Japan, particularly from the end of World War II to the new millennium. This paper also expands on the existing literature on educational policies in contemporary Japan by examining how the current educational reform efforts have affected equality of educational opportunity among children from different family backgrounds.*

Introduction

In many societies today, it is virtually impossible to read any documents on educational aims or goals without encountering phrases and terms such as ‘equality’, ‘equal opportunity’, ‘equal access’, ‘equal rights’ and so forth. The underlying assumption seems to be that ‘equality’ in some form is an intelligible and sensible educational ideal, yet there are different views about what sort of equality should be pursued. The issue of equality in education has been greatly debated, especially that of equality of opportunity served as a justification for much of the post-war restructuring of educational systems around the world.

In the 1960s and 1970s, equality of educational opportunity became an important subject in many industrialised Western countries. A number of definitions of the concept were developed by social scientists (Coleman et. al, 1969; Halsey, 1972; Jencks et. al, 1972). Compared with England and the United States, there was less research about changes in the understanding and use of the concept in Japan. Moreover, the previous researches dealt particularly with the shift of the concept during the American Occupation period, focusing on the process of creation of the new Constitution and the Fundamental Law of Education (FLE) (Suzuki, 1970; Duke, 1973; Horio & Yamazumi, 1976; Kubo, 1984; Tsuchimochi, 1993).

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It is therefore necessary to update the work of previous scholars concerning equality of opportunity. To do so, this article analyses the kinds of equality of educational opportunity Japan aims to achieve, especially since the Second World War and how decision makers and interest groups apply equality of opportunity to educational policies. This article also expands upon the existing literatures on education issues in Japan by examining how the current education policies affect equality of educational opportunity among children from different social background.

Arguing over Equality of Opportunity

In order to trace the evolutionary shifts in interpretation of the concept of equal opportunity and to explore the reasons for changes in policy, we should consider a historical approach. In this perspective, the studies of Passin (1965), Kobayashi (1976), Beauchamp and Vardaman (1994), and Marshall (1994) provide useful explanations of the general history of contemporary Japanese schooling in terms of its contribution to modernisation and economic development. Also, in selecting historical documents, it is important to focus upon public statements, particularly those which use the term 'equality' or 'equality of opportunity', and which were made mainly by the central administrative (Ministry of Education: MOE) and advisory bodies (for example, Central Council for Education: CCE). It is also significant to trace the major political parties' interpretations of equality of opportunity as reflected in their publications and in parliamentary debates, and compare them with one another.

To analyse the policy formulation process, there are several important studies. For example, Schoppa (1991) provided detailed analysis of the educational policy-making process by using the models of the many 'actors' (i.e. major political parties, bureaucracy, and industrial groups) during the Ad-Hoc Council's education reform of the 1980s. Schoppa described how the Japanese policy-making process in education could become paralysed when there was disagreement between 'conservatives' (the Liberal Democratic Party: LDP, industrial groups and the conservative bureaucrats) and 'progressives' (the Japan Teacher's Union: JTU and Japan Socialist Party) and argued that this 'immobilism' could become an element to delay the progress of educational arguments at the national level. Duke (1973), Thurston (1973), and Aspinall (2001) analysed the history of the Japan Teacher Union within the contemporary Japanese political system and introduced the various theoretical models which accounted for the roles of the JTU in the wider context of Japanese unionism and party politics.

In addition, of the various lenses to view equality of educational opportunity in Japan, this article is particularly concerned with the following two paradigms: 'meritocracy' and 'egalitarianism'. Indeed, throughout this study, we will see interplay between meritocracy and egalitarianism, which eventually caused a transformation in the concept of equality of opportunity over the period (Okada, 1999). It could also be said that the Japanese educational policies formulated to promote equality of opportunity reflected the attitudes of two distinct groups to education – the conservatives and the progressives, as categorised by Schoppa (1991). The concept's shifting meaning was always inseparably connected with the ethos, philosophy, and aims of the two groups. The conservatives had a tradition of encouraging the idea of meritocracy and insisting on allocating the nation's

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children according to their different abilities within a diversified school system (Horio, 1988). On the other hand, the progressives, particularly the JTU, demanded a common secondary schooling for all children regardless of family background and children's different ability (Duke, 1973; Thurston, 1973; Aspinall, 2001). Their demand was generally characterised as idealistic and impractical by conservatives. Also, their ideological emphasis upon the egalitarianism of educational opportunity and their suggested policies were fundamentally divergent from those of conservatives during that period.

The findings of social scientific research provided a growing volume of evidence that the expansion of the formal and legal meaning of equal opportunity in Japanese education had a limited effect in bringing about equality for children in their adult life in terms of social mobility and income (Ishida, 1993; Tachibanaki, 1998; Yoneyama, 2002; Miura, 2005). It was also suggested that equality in education should be defined not only in terms of equal access, but in terms of equal achievement among children (Fujita, 1997; Kurosaki et. al, 1997). These arguments and findings have far-reaching implications for the efficacy of educational policies. Recently, there have even been concerns that equality of educational opportunity is lost and that this is leading to the stratification of Japanese society through the widening of income differentials in the 'gap society' (*kakusa shakai*). In the 'gap society' secured full-time jobs are becoming increasingly limited to those who graduate from prestigious universities and entry to those institutions is becoming connected more clearly with family income and investments. The CCE's education reforms since the 1990s, which were executed to give students more free time to explore their own interests (so-called *yutori kyōiku*), in reality, possibly led to the creation of children who could no longer see the point of working hard in school, and who then ended up unemployed or in casual work because educational success was so visibly related to family background; dropping out of the system altogether, or becoming disruptive within it (Genda & Kyokunuma, 2004).

Social Class Issues in the Debate over Equal Opportunity in Education

A key element in the debate over equality of opportunity concerns the inequality between different social groups in education. Terms such as "class inequality" or "social group bias" are widely used in industrial Western countries. In those countries, there is also a growing volume of evidence that the quantitative expansion of educational opportunity does not bring qualitative equality to children from the lower social groups, and social and educational reforms are introduced to tackle this problem.

However, in Japan the social background issue does not attract much attention in the official debates on education, although some educational sociologists revealed the existence of social bias in both children's academic achievement and in the proportion of graduates entering higher education. The Japanese government maintains a policy based on the meritocratic principle. Indeed, the issue of inequality between social groups fades from the educational debate, and instead concern increases about other issues such as "examination hell" or "*ijime*" (bullying).

Thus, although social inequality in educational opportunity exists in Japan as well as in Western countries, governments have taken different roads to reform the structure of their national education systems especially in the period between the 1950s and 1970s. Here another important question arises: Why has the class issue not attracted attention

from the general population of Japanese people in the official educational debate? Kariya (1995) attributed this phenomenon to people's sense of egalitarianism, which was probably the most significant variable that distinguished Japan from Western nations in the post-war period. It was further argued that Japanese teachers tended to treat all school children equally regardless of socioeconomic differences that might exist prior to schooling (ibid, 1995). In such a society, it was a taboo to treat them differently, and in that sense Japanese egalitarianism was the antithesis of the underlying compensatory education in England or so-called "head-start" programs in the United States.

Ideological Shift of the Concept of Equal Opportunity in Japan's Educational Policies

Pre-War Period

Equality of opportunity was one of the ideals which Japan developed in its educational policies during the last century. Since the latter half of the 19th century, when the Meiji government was able to transform feudal Japan into a fast-growing modern nation state, equality of opportunity as the underpinning rationale for mobilising the talents of the whole nation was applied to almost all domains of national policy, including education (Hunter, 1989; Linicome, 1993; Marshall, 1994). The need to catch up with western countries impelled the nation to move towards realising this ideal by fostering a national elite. Likewise the growth of liberalism, with its call for distributive justice, helped to bring equality of opportunity to the forefront as a national ideal. However, despite the fact that elementary/basic education was already universal by 1886, the principle had rarely – if ever – been applied beyond the post-primary education level until the American Occupation authorities scrapped the pre-war Japanese education system. In fact, opportunities in secondary education and above in part were dependent upon, and generally corresponding with, the contemporary patterns of social stratification, regional disparity, and different treatments of boys and girls. Pre-war secondary education was a complex and hierarchical system comprising middle schools for a (male) elite, and vocational, higher elementary and youth schools for the majority.

Education Reform under American Occupation

The post-war education system was introduced by the American Occupation aiming at the 'democratisation', 'demilitarisation', and 'decentralisation' of Japanese society (Duke, 1973; Kubo, 1984; Tsuchimochi, 1993). The new system was the American model: the first nine years were compulsory education, composed of six years of elementary school and three years of lower secondary school, after which came three years of upper secondary school. All higher educational institutions were integrated into either four years in universities or two years in junior colleges. The new system was thus called the '6-3-3-4' system. This system was simpler than the pre-war system and was aimed at providing greater opportunities to advance to secondary and higher education.

The general trend of the post-war Occupation reforms in Japan was originally to interpret the concept of equality of opportunity in an 'egalitarian' way, emphasising

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self-realisation, rather than as a justification for differentiation between children. This ideal of equal opportunity was incorporated into Article 26 of the post-war Constitution and Article III of the Fundamental Law of Education (FLE). In the general circumstances of the post-war period, the ideological emphasis was placed upon 'equality' rather than 'meritocracy' or 'efficiency', and the FLE's aims were fundamentally divergent from those supported by the state before the war – allocation of national children into different types of secondary schools in terms of their social function for national prosperity.

From 1950s to 1970s

The period of the 1950s could be described as essentially one of consolidation, but also a time when the implementation of the FLE began to be challenged. Towards the end of the 1950s, criticism of the new systems began to emerge, along with pressure to redefine the concept of equality of opportunity declared in the FLE. Once the American Occupation in Japan ended in 1952, the Japanese government began to undertake a revision of various legislative legacies of the Occupation and to modify them according to the domestic conservative ideology of the day. This process was known as the 'reverse course' (Schoppa, 1991). In education, the conservative government, together with the MOE and industrial interest groups, attacked some aspects of the Occupation reforms. Behind these criticisms, the philosophical basis of the concept of equality of opportunity in the Occupation's educational reform began to be eroded by a strong emphasis on 'efficiency' and 'meritocracy'. In this context, conservatives insisted that equality of educational opportunity should mean '*equal cultivation of different ability*' in order to foster a national elite (Seirei Shimon linkai, 1951; Yamazaki, 1986). The fiercest opponent of these conservative groups was the JTU. The JTU had emerged as a major force defending the 6-3-3-4 system, maintaining the system's emphasis on equality of educational opportunity as stipulated in the FLE. Strong obstruction from the JTU prevented any change taking place until the late 1980s when it split into two unions (Aspinall, 2001). Thus, from the 1950s to the end of the early 1990s, severe disputes frequently unfolded between conservatives and the JTU over the principle of equality of educational opportunity.

There was no doubt that post-war Japan made enormous strides in providing the nation's children with expanded educational opportunities covering the whole range of pre-school to higher education, particularly since the period of high-speed economic growth in the 1960s. The widespread popularity of the idea of equality of opportunity resulted from the belief that expansion of education would bring about greater social equality and at the same time a stronger national economy. The 'manpower policy' and 'human capital policy' provided a theoretical basis for this expansion (Keizai Shingikai, 1963).

Nevertheless, equality of opportunity was conceived in a specifically Japanese way at the beginning of the 1970s. During the long economic boom, Japan experienced rapid changes in its economy and became a leading industrial society. It was confronted with the task of adjusting the nation's industrial structure to emphasise industries on the cutting edge of scientific and technological change. In addition, the Japanese government was once again forced to look into its educational system. Even though it was successful in terms of past performance, it had been designed to emphasise examinations and to create a large number of quality workers for the catch-up phase of Japan's development. With the Japanese economy becoming increasingly dependent on international business,

fast-changing science, and technological industries, the government was faced with demands from many quarters, especially industrial circles, calling on it to reform its educational system in order to bring it into line with the growing need for more diversely talented and creative workers. Against this background, the concept of equality of educational opportunity became interpreted as the *same* possibility of access for each pupil to *diversified* schools, curriculum, teaching methods, and treatment corresponding to ability.

From 1980s Onward

Accordingly, the established 6-3-3-4 system began to be seen as failing in fostering talent at a national level, and also failing to provide various educational opportunities, “which suited each individual’s abilities and aptitudes.” Twice in the twenty-year period between 1970 and 1990, the Japanese government embarked on major educational reforms. The first was the CCE comprehensive reform programme in 1971, which sought to introduce a greater degree of diversity into the educational system capable of producing the type of workers required for the next stage in Japan’s economic advance (CCE, 1971). The second, the Ad-Hoc Council on Education (AHEC) set up in 1984, similarly tried to achieve more flexibility by introducing ‘market competition’ into the educational system in order to restore the high standards of attainment that existed in the pre-war middle schools, effectively select national elites, and triumph in international industrial competition (Goodman, 1989; Schoppa, 1991; Hood, 2001; Okano & Tsuchiya, 1999). The AHEC also advocated the adoption of the notion of ‘freedom of choice’, which meant more choice for parents, and more emphasis on a child’s ‘individuality’ to achieve these goals (AHEC, 1986). The CCE’s reform proposal of the late 1990s to diversify the 6-3-3-4 system could be seen as essentially continuous with the aims of both previous initiatives of the government from the 1970s.

The liberalisation process first advocated by the AHEC developed gradually by the CCE reports during the 1990s in two main phases: first by individualisation and secondly by diversification (CCE, 1997). This process was based on market rules and the assumption that better quality would be achieved through freedom of choice, autonomy, and entrepreneurship, and that state schools should not expect to rely any longer solely on government initiatives, but also on their self-correcting and self-responsibility. Increased freedom in the curriculum, the 5-day school week, 6-year state secondary schools², grade-skipping, and relaxation of the school catchment area were justified under the slogan ‘*kosei jūshi*’ (individuality). For tracing the shift in the major concepts of equality in education, the concept of individuality would contain significant elements, on the one hand, the repudiation of the popular logic ‘equal opportunities of receiving education according to children’s ability,’ on the other, the reinterpretation of the meaning of equal opportunity, by proposing a new concept, ‘opportunities for individualisation of each child,’ namely using the term of ‘equality of free choice’ (Okada, 1999).

The CCE’s series of reports in the 1990s would conclude an era of almost four decades of attempts by Conservatives to create an elite track in the present 6-3-3-4 system by introducing the 6-year state secondary school system as a step towards a new order by which state school standards could be restored. Yet, this proposal of the CCE raised the

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question of whether real equal opportunity in education would be achieved. In fact, the 6-year state secondary school would be unlikely to bring about the extended freedom of choice, which the CCE desired to achieve, and would merely further promote social inequalities in educational opportunities which were already entrenched in the existing education system (Okada, 1999).

Thus, the gloss on equality insisted on by successive governments of the post-war period – *Nōryokushugi* (diversification based on children's different abilities) – was reappraised as the most important yardstick in evaluating equality in education for the coming new century. In other words, the diversification of the system together with the notion of freedom of choice was demanded and justified in the name of equality of educational opportunity. This represented the existing trend in official educational statements.

Current Disputes on Educational Inequalities

Since the mid-1990s in Japan, there has been extensive coverage in both the mass media and academic books and articles describing how low birth rate results in parents' excessive willingness to invest in their children's education, paving the way for extra instruction at cram schools outside formal schooling. Some observers have gone so far as to proclaim that this demographic shift would mean the end of Japan's examination hell or *shiken jigoku*. The so-called "2009 Crisis" was so named because it was thought that year would be the first when there would no longer be any competition to get into university since the places available at higher education institutions would equal the number of potential applicants. However, this did not mean, as some have intimated, that the competition to get into higher education would disappear.

Unequal Competition from the Start

Instead some educationalists and sociologists have suggested that examination hell would continue in an altered form and would be coupled with unequal competition from the start of children's lives (Kariya, 2001; Okada, 2011). Most troubling to many critics were the emerging fixed inequalities in educational opportunities among the different social strata through all stages of schooling (Kariya, 2001). Famous private middle schools, offering guaranteed access to a prestigious private high school and a high probability of getting into a top university, had been attracting increasing numbers of students. Students who began this process early commenced their preparations in elementary school. Indeed, richer parents had always been able to supplement their children's education with costly extra tuition and, to an extent, the education system therefore reproduced the class profile of Japanese people.

An editorial in the *Asahi Shinbun* on 21 May 2006 under the headline "Educational Opportunity Depends on Parents' Income" reported this tendency in the following terms: "21 million [Japanese] yen (about 200, 000 US Dollars) per child was needed to send them to a private kindergarten, middle school, high school, and university" and concluded that "[i]t is extremely difficult for an average family to send two children to private middle schools." The *Asahi* article additionally quotes the critical comments of Mimizuka Hiroaki, a professor at Ochanomizu University, concerning "unequal competition

from the start,” as he expressed apprehension about generating inequalities of educational opportunities according to earning differentials of families:

Nowadays, the difference between each family’s economic situation and culture is greatly influencing children’s academic ability. It is an unfair competition from the start. Data from a survey of elementary school children aged 12 years in a suburban city of Tokyo with a population of 250,000 showed that 14 percent go to cram schools. 22 percent of the children who attend cram schools scored over 90 points (scale of 100) on a standard mathematical exam. On the other hand, in the case of children who do not go to cram school, only 1 percent scored over 90 points on the same exam. The difference of academic ability between children who go to cram school and those who do not has been expanding even in the provinces, for example in the cities with the seat of the prefectural government where private junior high and high schools and prestigious cram schools are often found. (*Asahi Shinbun*, 21 May 2006, p.15)

Many social scientists point out that under the LDP, education policies for the underprivileged were being counteracted by policies to provide more educational choice (Fujita, 2007; Cave, 2009; Okada, 2011). This statement referred to the LDP government’s policies which were aimed at protecting the educational interests of the least educationally advantaged and the most vulnerable to failure, on the one hand. On the other hand, there were policies for those already well placed in the market, aimed at broadening their educational options.

For instance, educational sociologists denounced the educational reform carried out by the MOE, including the revised Course of Study during the 1990s, on the basis of data about the number of hours children were studying outside of school (Kariya, 2001; Mimizuka, 2007). According to academic research data, the MOE’s relaxation of educational standards, the introduction of so-called *yutori kyōiku*, had diminished children’s interest in learning. Indeed, research found that the enfeeblement of the value of studying was especially pronounced in the lower social strata. The diffusion of the idea that competition based on examination (*shiken jigoku*) was a vice that had made it harder for those in the lower strata to maintain an interest in learning. Under the LDP government’s educational policies, the widening gap between the upper and lower strata in terms of children’s eagerness to learn and advance academically would cause Japan to turn into a fully-fledged “class society.”

Educational Policies of the Democratic Party of Japan

The Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ: *Minshutō*) won a landslide victory in the 2009 election in the House of Representatives, and Yukio Hatoyama was elected as Japan’s new Prime Minister. Hatoyama underlined his resolve to challenge the ex-ruling LDP’s structural reform drive and his adherence to the market principle in all aspects of social activities. He proposed a general shift to an “economy for the people,” placing greater emphasis on citizens’ quality of life. The reform of the Diet (i.e. Japan’s bicameral

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legislature) ,with the transformation of a bureaucrat-dominated government into one led by politicians as its core, was also noteworthy.

At the top of the DPJ administration's policy priorities was the proposed child benefit. The DPJ's campaign manifesto of the August 2009 general election included a child benefit that would provide a monthly allowance of 26,000 yen for every child of middle school age (15 years of age or younger) in the nation. Such an allowance required 5.3 trillion yen to be budgeted annually. In the initial year of the DPJ's pledged program, in which the allowances would be only 13,000 yen per child, the cost would reach 2.3 trillion yen with no income ceiling on households to receive the benefits. This outlay of funds was in addition to the existing child benefit system, where the national government, prefectural governments, and municipal governments funded a third of the 5,000 yen or 10,000 yen monthly allowances per child of primary school age or younger. For a more detailed explanation regarding the educational budget in Japan, see Yotoriyama (2012).

With no household income limit for the subsidy, the DPJ's envisioned plan provided families with an annual subsidy of 118,800 yen, which was equal to the standard cost of a child's annual tuition at a public high school. This sum would double for lower income families with annual income not exceeding 5 million yen. The DPJ's child allowance further granted matching amounts to families whose children were in attendance at more expensive private high schools. The DPJ envisioned this child subsidy programme covering 3.6 million students at a cost of 450.1 billion yen for the fiscal year of 2010, meaning the government would be supplying the essential subsidy funding required by high school operators such as the prefectural boards of education.

Another initiative on the DPJ's agenda was a tax reduction for families with dependent high school students—children 16 to 22 years old. The DPJ proposed to employ the savings resulting from these cuts in financing the free high school education plan. (This tax benefit reduced the taxable income of eligible households by 630,000 yen per child, cutting the total tax burden on households with high school students by more than 200 billion yen. The benefit was greater for higher-income families subject to higher tax rates.) The initiative's pivotal innovation rested in radically reducing the tax deduction while equivalently endowing tuition subsidies and thereby efficiently contributing superior financial support to lower-income families. Though the economic burden on more prosperous families would increase somewhat, the DPJ believed this new innovation served to supply equal education prospects to children regardless of their parents' income.

Yet there were high school education expenses other than tuition that required addressing. These included entrance fees, costs for teaching materials, and expenses for school excursions, beyond those the subsidy covered. For such additional expenses many lower income families still needed financial aid. To address these monetary needs of low-income families struggling to meet the costs of educating their children, prefectural governments offered high school tuition reductions or exemptions. Whenever possible, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport, Science and Technology (MEXT) and local governments needed to cooperate to figure out effective methods of employing the savings from the new DPJ child subsidy to augment financial support for these more disadvantaged households.

Difficulties to Implementation

However, critics pointed out that it would be difficult for the DPJ administration to implement its election promise concerning education in the coming fiscal year. Given the serious financial squeeze, a cut in the deduction was necessarily considered (Okada, 2011; Ouchi, 2011). For this reason, the Government Revitalisation Unit was established as a new organisation to work on eliminating from JFY 2010 (Japanese Fiscal Year 2010: April 2010–March 2011) wasteful or unnecessary budget requests, to total more than 95 trillion yen (about 950 billion US Dollars).

Moreover, media coverage of the DPJ's handling of the education issue brought to light problematic issues. First, though the DPJ proposed monetary assistance through its child subsidy programme that allowed for free public high school tuition, the media's questioning exposed the lack of a plan or even an outline for attaining its goal of expanding public assistance for children's welfare. Though the administration had committed to escalating measures to assist parents in child-rearing, they did not yet have a working model to attempt child care assistance, which should have been the central focus of its child policy. As a consequence, there were divided views within the government over whether central or local government had primary responsibility for administering child care services.

Second, although the DPJ stated its objective of a general shift to an "economy for the people" and "a major policy change" with its foundations in the child subsidy, it had thus far been unsuccessful in even producing the coordinator post in charge of resolving conflicting child policy views. With the DPJ government credibility at issue, more cabinet embarrassments and imbrogios were liable to ensue when child allowance deliberations commenced, unless this situation was rectified in advance of the Diet session.

Yet, any major policy shift was likely to induce divergent arguments. Lacking an effectual structure with which to implement new policy, no successfully efficient procedures could be fashioned. Unaided, the enhanced development of child subsidies would prove ineffectual against the increasingly severe shortage of day care centres. Moreover, the mitigation of issues such as child abuse and parental depression from child-rearing difficulties remained impossible, against which solely improving child allowances was ineffectual.

On 8 December 2009, the DPJ approved a policy package, which they depicted as offering emergency economic procedures to increase the Japanese people's sense of economic growth and personal security. Including measures to augment child care services, this package integrated the formation of a government panel to study procedures to assist the next generation of citizens. However, with the formation of such a government panel, the administration had to consider the urgent necessity of guaranteeing that the panel would effectively proceed to develop a general approach that included detailed methods to socialise child care tasks as well as engender scope for expansion of methods for potential future requirements.

Recent Signs of a Growing Sense of Unfairness in Japan

It seems reasonable to suppose that the dramatic nature of post-war political, social, and economic changes partly contributed toward establishing a society of

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degreeocracy dominated by the lack of attention given to the issue of social class in the debate on equality of educational opportunity in Japan (Kariya, 1995; Okada, 2001). Despite this popular image of degreeocracy, cross-national comparisons by sociologists show no evidence that educational opportunities were more open in Japan than in England and the United States.

Certainly, after World War II, Japan experienced an expansion of its education systems. However, expansion of the system did not weaken the effect of social origin on educational attainment. The results of various studies suggested that educational opportunities were limited by the various resources with which an individual grew up; educational attainment was largely determined by the amount of the family's economic and cultural capital, not only in the other industrialised countries, but also in Japan.

In recent years, reliable nationwide surveys have indicated that a significant proportion of Japanese people regard inequality as the attribute that best characterized contemporary Japanese society (refer to SSM, 1995 for details).

Japanese people have become aware that opportunities for educational advancement are not open to all individuals and that various social background characteristics influence the attainment of education. Consideration turned to the inequality of educational opportunity at an individual level. People were not entirely satisfied with their education system, where degreeocracy was imposed as a priority upon them and the intense competition was the consequence of again giving advantages to those who were privileged to start with them.

In fact, social scientists have discovered signs of growing educational inequality in recent years. Some research findings show an increasingly large proportion of entrants to Japan's most prestigious universities coming from private school backgrounds. In particular, they emphasise the growing number of privileged students who have attended private 6-year secondary school as opposed to three years of lower secondary school followed by three years of upper secondary school. These private schools, similar to the Public Schools in England, which charged considerable fees and catered to the upper-middle class, not only offered a heightened possibility of educational success, but also passed on what Bourdieu calls the cultural capital of the elite to their students (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Parents who could afford to send their children to more expensive institutions greatly improved those children's educational chances. This tendency (since the 1990s) has been increasing in an age when the birth rate is in decline.

Conclusions

This article has examined the historical formation of the concept of equality of opportunity, which has been applied to the educational policy in Japan, particularly from the end of World War II to the new millennium. Examining the case of Japan has given us the opportunity to arrive at a fuller understanding of peculiarities in the process of the transformation of the concept. Indeed, throughout this study we have seen interplay between egalitarianism and meritocracy which eventually caused a transformation in the concept of equality of opportunity over the period. The future remains uncertain, but the findings of this study suggest that this dialectical stress between egalitarianism and meritocracy will continue to plague policy-makers in Japan.

This paper also expanded existing literature on educational policies in contemporary Japan by examining how the current educational reform efforts have affected equality of educational opportunity among children from different family backgrounds. Japan had reached a critical point, facing increases in both inequality of outcome and inequality of opportunity due to poverty. It has now become necessary to halt the worsening trend and revise the approach to the issue. It was urgent for the current government to ensure that the planned educational policies are effective, not only in their overall approach, but also in the specific measures taken to reduce educational inequalities and socialise child care.

Overall, the results of this study suggest that Japanese people need to reconsider, and explore more deeply the various possible meanings of terms such as equality of opportunity, equality, ability, social class, and meritocracy and see how these have been treated and debated over in different periods in other industrialised countries. The issue of social class inequalities has disappeared from the official educational debate in Japan since the mid-1960s. It has not yet reappeared and/or been reconsidered under recent conditions. It might be said that Japanese people can gain many insights that could help to solve contemporary class issues from cases in other industrialised nations.

Notes

¹This paper is developed to building on the book: Akito OKADA (2011), *Education and Equal Opportunity in Japan*, Berghahn Books, New York.

²The 6-year secondary school (est. AY1999) is a new type of school, a combination of traditional 3 year junior high school and 3 year senior high school education. There are various types of school, state and private. The number is growing but still accounts for a small portion of the entire sector.

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