

## EDUCATION

# "I've Already Given Up"

## Control, Resistance, and Death in the Japanese School System

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*The concept of yutori in Japanese translates literally into "latitude," meaning the students would have the latitude to be more free, and we have found that it is easier to understand the term by using "freedom," though it is a very rough translation.*

"I don't care. I've already given up on my life," said one boy from Osaka. Another from the East said, "I won't go to school any more. I don't know my classmates anymore, they're strangers... I'm just an ordinary person now." Both of these boys are twelve-year-old elementary school students. "I'm tired," mutters a junior high school girl. "I can't understand why I have to go to school day after day just to repeat the same things. I don't want to go anymore."

In Japan, an ever-increasing number of children have become mentally and physically exhausted by 'exam hell,' by being scored by examinations, by corporal punishment, and by bullying, and these people are refusing to go to school in ever-growing numbers.

It is ironic that inside Japan, which has become not only an economic superpower but which is in the process, with the ideology of "international contributions" and sending out military forces to participate in U.N. Peace-keeping Operations, that so many children feel that school is simply a shackle on their lives.

At the beginning of the 1970's, Everett Reimer published a book called, *School Is Dead*, which offered a radical critique of school as an institution. In the Japan of 1994, the conditions of schools and of children are becoming desperate. It is true, yes,

that a policy of *yutori* has been put into effect under which schoolchildren have been given an extra day of rest (under a five-day school week). In fact, however, the pressure for the establishment of this system came from outside Japan-bashing and pressure from overworked adults.

This opportunistic plan, however, has not been effective in making school conditions better. In fact, students have found themselves squeezed between 'control' and 'freedom.'

### Not Attending School

The designation "school refuser" or "school phobia" refers to "children who cannot or do not attend school," a deeply-rooted social phenomenon in Japan. Public education is mandated for the nine years between the ages of six and fifteen, and Japan currently has 35,000 public schools in this range. There are at present, however, 65,000 children who do not attend or hardly ever attend school, more than 3.5 times the figure for 1980 (see Table 1). For every junior high school there are four or five such children. In the high school age range, people who do not attend school are termed "drop-outs," and there are 120,000 children in this range (see Table 2); this number is also on the rise.

In spite of these problems, however, the overwhelming majority of children continue to attend

school. The emergence of school refusal as a social problem was not foreseen by the Ministry of Education. It can be seen as a "miscalculation" or as a "contradiction" of the Ministry's policies, which were linked to economic growth and manpower policy. The Ministry has considered these children somehow "unsuited" to school, and has hence tried to develop countermeasures to "suit" them. The Ministry in fact has an "Adjustment Direction Committee" with the mandate to spot unsuited children at an early age, or to find "disturbed children," and to give them direction. Clearly, however, the problem involves the policies of scholastic competition, of a single-minded pursuit of ability, of the pursuit of efficiency, and of management-alism, but schools have refused to face up to this and seek simply to adjust children to their system.

The refusal to attend school includes both the resistance of children to school itself as well as the self-assertion of the "voiceless." In the beginning of the 20th century, for instance, children of commoners in England conducted a wave of "school strikes." At that time, being "educated" meant being fed with middle class culture, and the children resisted this subjugation to "school culture" and to the physical punishment which, at the time, including flogging. The children of Japan, the "economic superpower"

of the late 20th century, are giving us a reminder of this history. Increasingly, the Ministry of Education will have to recognize that school refusal is more than a problem of unusual children, that it is occurring among many average children as well.

## Suicide

At the end of 1992, there was a rash of tragic incidents involving adolescents. On December 31st, five girls from one junior high school, all between the ages of 14 and 15, jumped off the eighth floor of an apartment building in a residential area in Mito City. Three died instantly, and the other two were badly wounded. One of the two survivors later told the *Asahi Shimbun* that, "We were sniffing glue, and we started talking about killing ourselves. We figured we wouldn't be afraid if we got really high, so we did it and then jumped." The father of one of the girls said, "They were always together, but were lonesome children."

Suicide among adolescents has become so common that when people read newspaper reports they just shake their head and say, "Not again." In the latter half of the 1970's, one child under the age of 16 committed suicide every three days, and two adolescents under 20 committed suicide every day. This trend peaked in 1986, with 268 incidents, then



**Table 1** Numbers of School Refusers by Category

	Elementary	Junior High	Total
1970	3,626	8,357	11,983
1975	2,830	7,704	10,534
1980	3,679	13,536	17,215
1985	4,071	27,926	31,997
1986	4,407	29,673	34,080
1987	5,293	32,748	38,041
1988	6,285	36,100	42,385
1989	7,179	40,080	47,259
1990	8,014	40,223	48,237
1991	12,645	54,172	66,817
1992	13,710	58,421	72,131

**Source:** Ministry of Education

began to decline, and there were 159 incidents in 1992.

Whatever the particular motives of the five girls, their action indicates that children see Japanese society as an "irrational and difficult place" which goes not give them any hope. It is undisputable that the institution of school has a great effect on the lives of children. Exam hell, standardized tests, and rankings, all are means of computing a person's value as a human being, and children are forced into this environment. They are cast out into a strange world of unspeakable hardships, insecurity, and agitation. Who has the right to coerce children into this?

### **"Bullying" (*Ijime*)**

"Bullying" also represents a major problem in Japanese schools. On January 13, 1991, a 13-year-old boy was found dead, wrapped inside a gym mat, at a junior high school in Shinjo City, Yamagata Prefecture. The boy had apparently been suffocated. Seven other boys from the same school, aged 12 to 14, were subsequently arrested. The victim had moved from another school, and was a quiet person, which made him a target for bullying. He never stood up to the group, but on the day of his death finally showed resistance and was beaten up. The bloodthirstiness and ugliness of the incident was

stunning. It also left many unanswered questions: why couldn't other students stop it, and why were the teachers not able to prevent it? Bullying, like suicide, shows clearly the true nature of Japanese schools.

Both of these two incidents took place in ordinary rural towns, not urban centers. This indicates how widespread the problems are. According to a survey by the Ministry of Education, incidents of bullying in elementary and junior high schools reached a peak in 1985 at 155,066, but then fell to just 24,308 by 1990. The number of incidents in junior highs, however, rose from 11,922 in 1991 to 13,632 in 1992.

"Bullying" is just one word, but it includes many different phenomena: ostracism, meanness, teasing, and physical assaults. It is usually aimed at vulnerable, distinctive, or handicapped children. In addition, not only "problem children" are involved — many "ordinary" children take part as well.

When talking about the issue, bureaucrats in the Ministry of Education or the General Affairs Youth Countermeasures Agency see "improvements" and "declining incidents" which they attribute to the great efforts of school administrators. Their surveys however, only touch on appearances. Bullying is in fact becoming more insidious and consistent. Why is the phenomenon so widespread and so deep?

rooted and persistent in schools? If it represents a particular feature of Japanese schools, then it may in fact be an aberration, a mirror reflecting the "sickness" of Japanese society. Many people see it this way.

The Ministry of Education sees bullying as problem behavior by a minority of children, especially "problem" ones, and their reaction is to study these children, to look at their personalities, their histories, and their family environments. It is in this sense that the Ministry has "dealt with" or "taken measures" to handle the problem.

### **Isolation and Segregation**

The bullying phenomenon has become a subject of sensation, and explanations have been given by psychologists, pedagogists, and journalists. They have tended not to support the views of the government, but have nonetheless put a lot of focus on the children's environments, and have tried repeatedly to place the problem in relation to "school and society," within the broader context of contemporary Japanese society. Views which emphasized family environments might go something like this: "company men" work like bees, until they die from "overwork," and the absence of the father leads to the "destruction of the family."

Accounts which take the children's view tend to emphasize that "children miss the chance to play." They tend to focus on children who spend their time playing TV games or alone in their rooms. Some children are said to be "aliens" who have forgotten how to play with groups of children who are not their own age. Children are trapped in a social system which forces them to go through exam hell, and to attend cram schools in order to get into a "good school." This in reality makes it even more difficult for the children to escape the system. They are all placed onto a uniform conveyor belt, and this creates a phenomenon in which groups of isolated children are made into classmates. Bullying one isolated child can thus become a kind of "amusement," and other children participate in the bullying to ensure their membership in the group.

The special meanings and roles that schools, families, and communities played in the raising of children have been lost. School has expanded to dominate all aspects of children's lives. People who do not go through the schooling process are considered abnormal, and this creates a sort of "psychological and mental coercion." There are two vectors which act to polarize the children; one directs them into the competitive elite course; the other makes them compete through "academic ability" and "money-making ability." The structure that represses

the minds of children has become multi-tiered and congested.

### **"Clusters of Scholastic Ability"**

Needless to say, the problems of school have a close relationship with the existence of an "academic attainment society," in which companies place much emphasis on educational background. There have been measures, by both the government and by business circles, to try to mitigate the irrational and unfair practice of hiring according to the reputation of the school, but we have not yet seen any fundamental change.

Under this system, schools have become mechanisms for reproducing social status and managing children rather than for training personnel and reproducing labor. If education has played any major role in Japan's emergence as an "economic superpower," it has been in terms of reproducing groups of skilled personnel, labor power, and class divisions, which back the national economy. In this way, education has become the basis for these divisions.

Schools have been able to play this role by metamorphosing into tools for control maintained by coercion and consent, repression and expulsion, division and consolidation, and discrimination and assimilation. Schools have taken on the function of developing manpower and reinforcing national integration, and it has therefore seemed natural that they should be placed under the control of the state. The Ministry of Education has maintained this view for the past one hundred years. Japanese schools, with their mission of propelling industry and nationalism, are outstanding for their format of conformity, management, and "formality."

In the spring of 1990, a schoolgirl from a Hyogo Prefecture high school was killed when one of the school teachers crushed her head while closing the steel gate at the school's entrance. She was slightly late, was dashing toward the door to make sure she got in, the teacher simply slammed it shut. It was a shocking incident. Schools have created teachers so submissive to school regulations that they have more regard for these rules than for the human rights of their students. What it is that is so important to the schools that they can take away the lives of children to protect? They act as a kind of asylum or purgatory in which children are controlled.

The major responsibility for the state of affairs can be placed with the government's education policy, and in particular with the Ministry of Education. In the mid 1980's, the Ministry created an Ad Hoc Council for Educational Reform, with the aim of creating an educational system geared to the 21st

century. The slogans they raised included, "internationalization," "self-development," "informationization," and the "privatisation" of education. In terms of "self-development," there were recommendations to organize classes in junior high school according to the "educational attainment" of students. What this meant was an intensification of discrimination, sorting, and screening. This was the ideology of seeing people as "clusters of academic skills." People were not to be treated as human beings. The perceptive sensitivity of children, however, reacts against this way of thinking. They develop a disrespect for and an apprehension of school. It is no wonder they end up introverted or resistant.

### **The Hinomaru and "Kimigayo"**

The power of the Ministry of Education has become clear through the issue of the "national" flag and anthem. Before, during, and even after the war, Japan has not had a legally-designated national flag or an anthem. The government and the Ministry, however, have long considered the Hinomaru (the white flag with a red circle) and the "Kimigayo" to fit these designations. In 1989 the Ministry revised its national school curriculum, mandating the singing

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of the "Kimigayo" and flying of the Hinomaru at entrance and graduation ceremonies. This coercion has served to strengthen emperor worship and patriotism. "Kimigayo" is actually a prayer for the eternal sovereignty of the emperor as a god, and is based on the emperor worship which was prevalent in the prewar period. The Hinomaru, for its part, was a symbol of the Japanese invasion of the Asia-Pacific region.

This flag and song do not fit well with a constitution based on the sovereignty of the people and on pacifism. In addition, they represent an attempt at forcing people to worship the emperor,

an act which violates the freedom of worship embodied in the Constitution. In the period following World War II, the government and the Ministry have tried persistently to bring the Hinomaru and "Kimigayo" into the educational system. We can see the existence of a new nationalism based on the revival of the prewar ideology of emperor worship as a means to control education; the political strategies of a faction seeking to reinforce and expand patriotism; and social movements corresponding to these goals. The National Shrine Headquarters and the National Council for Protecting Japan form the main bodies of this movement, and they are linked with the ruling politicians.

### **Repressing Citizen's Movement**

There have been many social movements against the coercion of the Hinomaru and "Kimigayo." In one school, teachers who opposed the use of these symbols were reprimanded by the Board of Education. In 1985, the Ministry issued a directive ordering "complete enforcement" of the flag-flying and anthem-singing, and since that time more than 200 people throughout the country have received sanctions because of their opposition. In 1990, the Ministry went even further and ordered schools to sing the "national anthem."

The authoritarian acts of the bureaucracy have resulted in the expulsion of liberal-minded teachers, and schools have become ever more repressive. To the control of children has been added a control of teachers, and the control system has thus been contained into a "black box."

At the present, people who are aware of their rights as citizens are working to create a diverse movement in schools and communities against the punishment and repression carried out by state authorities. These groups have

often included both parents and teachers, and are forming a new type of social movement. In addition, many efforts to repeal the injustice of these punishments have been taken to court. In one aspect, of course, these cases have sought "justice from the state powers" rather than the "right to justice" guaranteed in the Constitution. Hence these cases are challenging the "mechanisms of control," or the institutions of punishment and justice. In the present context of Japan, administrative power is much stronger than that of the judiciary, and the independence of the latter has been seriously eroded. The significant objective of these cases is to produce a

continuing criticism of the authority of the Ministry of Education.

### **"Internationalization" and Xenophobia**

On one hand, the bureaucracy advocates the "internationalization" of education, but on the other it advocates national purity, xenophobic ethnicism, and nationalism. In this context, internationalization is limited to that necessary for nationalism. The number of foreign children and students who cannot speak Japanese is on the rise along with the increase in foreign nationals, including workers. Schools in Japan are not used to integrating people with differing cultures and languages, as the structure of the school is designed to assimilate and eliminate differences. Japanese people have failed to show any deep regret or even awareness of the neglect which they demonstrated toward the ethnic and cultural rights of the Ainu people, an indigenous people of Japan.

The Japanese government and the Ministry of Education worked to suppress the truth of the war of invasion carried out by Japanese imperialism, a fact which has emerged from critiques by other Asian people of Japanese school textbooks. In terms of this recognition of the past, one issue that has been raised has been how it will be possible to establish mutual understanding and a conscientious relationship with the people of other Asian countries. One person from China recently said that, "East Asian countries have a tendency to use the past crudely as a tool for nation-building." With regard to textbooks, his statement raises the point of to what degree the people of any country can be free from the framework of "national education," and that in any case this is a problem in need of study. Japanese nationalism is not only unaware of this objective, but is even moving in a parochial direction. On this point, it seems necessary for us to create some idea of coexistence based on disarmament and a non-violent ethnic identity. The Japanese ruling elites aim for Japan to become a political and economic superpower, and have still not taken steps to resolving the problems of war crimes, war responsibility, and war compensation. We must take seriously the importance of citizen's movements which are aim-

**Table 2 Numbers of High School Drop-outs**

1988	116,617
1989	123,069
1990	123,529
1991	112,933
1992	101,194

**Source:** Ministry of Education

ing to transform politics and social consciousness.

### **Conclusion**

"School is created with a special concern for creating a space to educate children, and school is thus different from real society." This philosophy, which is a uniquely Japanese conception, prevails within the social consciousness and bolsters state power. In school, the restriction of children's and teachers' rights are accepted as a matter of course. We have not yet seen either the institutionalization of a system for filing complaints or a procedure for rescuing children from reprimands and physical punishment. Ranking according to "scholarly ability," discriminatory educational evaluations, and management under school rules — all created one-sidedly for the school's convenience — derive from the needs of industry and of the state.

The wind of civil society, however, will have to sweep through school. Various people are trying to move in the direction of giving citizens a new sense of human rights, independence, and openness, rather than "national education" for the needs of the state. To what extent can these attempts break through the far-reaching web — the structure of management and repression? This is an important question for the future of education in Japan. ■