

## THE COMPETITIVE EDUCATION IN JAPAN (Part 3)\*

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## Part 3

### *V. Competition Creates the Social Order*

#### 1. Closed competition creates a new social order

Generally speaking, competition has the effect of eliciting a concentrated effort from the participants. This is not the only effect of competition, but various others examples are as such,

- 1) participants in direct opposition to each other,
- 2) competitive values become inflated—to win is most important,
- 3) to rank the participants in order from upper to lower levels according to the results of competition, and
- 4) to have them accept the present order as the right (and legal) one.

These effects, in one way or another, accompany competition, and the intensification of competition strengthens these effects.

The effects especially of 3 and 4 are strengthened in the 'closed competition' situation of phase III. Under 'restricted competition' of phase I (—1959), those who did not take part in the competition did not go on to a higher level of schooling. Thus the order which was created by the competition excluded part of the social classes. Under the 'open competition' of phase II (1960–1974), there was a continuous expansion of the framework of opportunity.

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Thus many participants enjoyed horizontal attainment, and the order from upper to lower was relieved.

Under the 'closed competition' of phase III (1975—), competition in education has included all social classes, and so this period gives us a full view of the effects of 3 and 4. If a student or his (her) parents endeavour to avoid the competition, it can not be interpreted as one's own choice of another course of life and thus another culture or value, but merely a dropping out from the competition, resulting in an automatic downgrading to the lowest section of the ranking order. In the upper section of this ranking order there exists the keen air of distinction — distinctive excellence — and in the lower section there is a continuous process of dropping out. As a whole, from top to bottom, a distinctive process, in which petty differences are transformed into a graded ranking, spreads in throughout the educational world.

## 2. The competitive social order is legitimized in modern society

Here it is important to note that the new social order created by educational competition is not only a right or legal one but has also become a *legitimate* order. The term, legitimacy, is used in the social sciences as in the 'legitimacy of political power', but to quote P. Bourdieu, when we use this term in the cultural field, it means<sup>1</sup>,

"All individuals, whether or not they wish it to be so, and whether or not they admit it, are, and know they are, placed within the field of application of system of rules and objective sanctions which make it possible to qualify their behaviour and organize it in a hierarchy in terms of culture."

'Ichiryu Daigaku (university of the first rank)', 'Teihenku (senior high school at the bottom of the ranking)' — there are many persons who would never approve such ranking descriptions, but the legitimate value has the superior social power by which it forces its rules and accompanying influences upon even those very persons.

This value of the order created by competition in education has been moving up to a higher position in society during the period of phase III. During the same period in Japan the prestige of schools and school teachers has not risen, but rather has decreased. However the prestige of the ranking order created by competition in schools has been increasing. The reasons for the increasing prestige of the order are firstly that competition has included almost all social classes and thus become extremely keen. In Japan the industrial world and the educational world are two large fields of intensified competition. In modern democratic society the order created by competition has a higher legitimate value than other orders, for example, family name or parent's estate.

The second reason is that the principle of the ranking order is '*achievement*', that is '*meritocracy*' in M. Young's terms<sup>2</sup>, and is linked to the same principle in the industrial field. The prototype of Japanese 'company society' is in the capitalist's control over labor. O. Watanabe said<sup>3</sup>:

<sup>1</sup> Bourdieu, P., *Photography*, translated by S. Whiteside, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1990., p. 196

<sup>2</sup> Young, M., *The Raising of Meritocracy*, Thomas & Hudson, London, 1958.

<sup>3</sup> Watanabe, O., *Yutakana shakai, Nihon no Kozo* (The social structure of Japan — 'an affluent society'), Rodoujunposha, Tokyo, 1990.

“The control is a mechanism in which laborers are encouraged to accept the aim of the company as their own and they are driven to competition among themselves to attain this aim.”

According to Watanabe such a competitive control mechanism developed in the 1960s and became established in the mid '70s. These periods are exactly coincident with the phase of intensification of competition in education.

## *VI. Logic and Mentality in the Competition Between Schools*

### **1. Survival competition between schools**

As we see in Figure 5(Part 2), the fertility rate in Japan has been continuously decreasing from 2.14 to 1.46 during the past two decades, the period of phase III. “When the population of children decreases, the schools at the lower rank will be forced to close through lack of new entrants.” Directors of private schools were quick to recognize this crisis. By nature, schools compete with each other to gain new students. Since the 1980s this competition between schools has become a matter of survival. The air of competition has been spreading from the private sector to the public sector. Given this situation, not attempting to make a competitive effort does not mean that a school remains in the same ranking, but rather lowers its position.

A certain public senior high school teacher told the students in his class about one male pupil whose conduct during the lesson was not so good that,

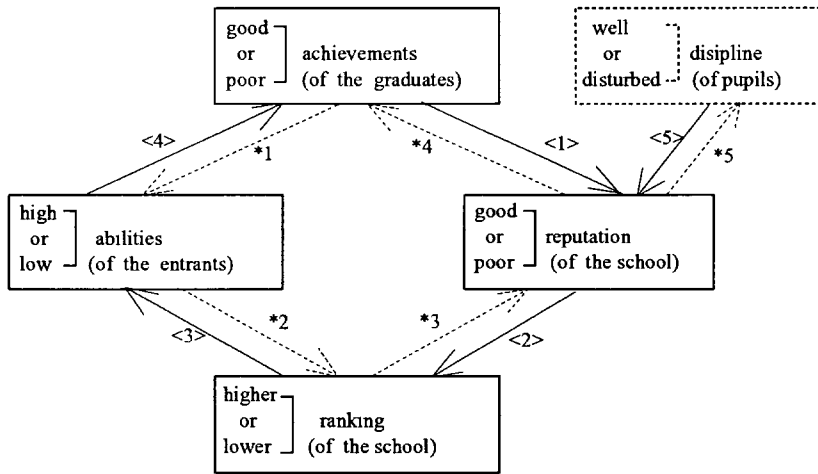
“He is a spy planted by the neighbouring school to damage the reputation of our school.”

In what this teacher said we can see that schools are pitted against each other and, given such competition, students who would normally be the target of educational practice become recognized by the teachers as means to raise the reputation of the school.

### **2. Competition between schools becomes a direction to seek the higher reputation of the school itself**

The word ‘reputation’ reflects the essence of competition between schools. What is the decisive factor in such competition? Firstly in Japan most decisive is the achievements of graduates going on to a higher level of education or going out into the labour market. It is true. But there is the question of whether these achievements are attained as a result of the effectiveness of the school or by the abilities of the entrants. If the latter is true, a vicious cycle exists as described in Figure 9.

FIGURE 9. A VICIOUS CIRCLE OF COMPETITION BETWEEN SCHOOLS



The four solid arrows in Figure 9 show the influences of one factor on another. <1> Good or poor achievements of the graduates influence the reputation of the school, <2> good or poor reputation of the school influences the ranking of the school, <3> higher or lower ranking of the school regulates the abilities of the entrants, and <4> high or low abilities of the entrants are related to the achievements of graduates.

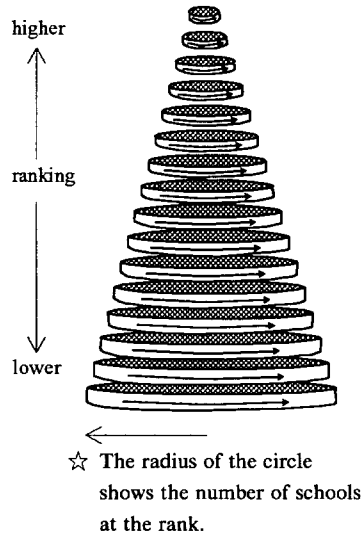
The four dotted arrows in dotted lines show how necessary efforts of one factor for affect another factor. On the process of <4>, if the school's efficiency is able to improve student achievements, this is the best-case scenario for the school. But now in Japan there are many 'Juku' and 'Yobiko', cram schools, that prepare students for entrance examinations, and they do this professionally and effectively, so it is not easy for schools to improve the achievements of their graduates solely through academic practice. Thus to achieve good results many schools seek entrants with high abilities(\*1) as the most dependable factor. But in the competitive field of school choices and entrance examinations, in order to attract bright students, it is necessary for the schools to have a higher ranking(\*2). To achieve a high ranking, the schools must have a good reputation(\*3). To obtain a good reputation, it's necessary that the graduates enter prestigious schools and companies(\*4). This is really a vicious circle.

If these relations are true, there is no rational reason for a 'higher ranking' in the inner process of the school. Certain historical factors occasionally allocated a certain school with a special rank, but since then there has begun the vicious circular movement described above.

In this system of competition and ranking among schools, there are a lot of circular boards which were piled up and ordered vertically, as described by the graphic shown in Figure 10.

Figures 9 and 10 are models. In the real case the ranking itself is rather stable but not

FIGURE 10. PILED AND ORDERED CIRCULAR BOARDS OF RANKING  
AMONG SCHOOLS AND ITS VICIOUS CIRCULAR MOVEMENT



immovable. There is much movement of ranking, up and down, over a long period of time. Thus the efforts of many schools to climb these piled circular boards vertically will not end.

The most successful way to climb in ranking is to improve the achievements of graduates through the academic practice. But as mentioned before this is not easy. It requires enormous efforts plus good luck. An alternative way to heighten the reputation of the school other than by route <1> is by offering students attractive, modern buildings and facilities or through advertising. However it is hard to build the reputation of a school with only a modern plant or through advertisements, as Japanese students and parents do not believe that these factors will provide good results.

The third, and now the most widely used method is by route <5>, shown in Figure 9. Schools in this category do not tolerate lateness or delinquency. They enforce regimentation in terms of dress and hair length, require absolute quiet in classrooms and hallways, and insist that students use the most polite forms of speech or salutation when addressing teachers and other adults. The 'good discipline' of pupils is easily noticed by the community at large and parents of students and is recognized as evidence of the 'good' educational practices.

The difference between routes <1> and <5> is the degree in which the real situation of students of the school reflects the factor. The achievements can not be forged, as they are the sum of the results measured by objective tests. However 'good discipline' does not necessarily reflect the real situation of the pupils, irrespective of whether or not the internal developments are attained by pupils. The schools and teachers would be able to force the students to maintain 'good discipline' as an outward appearance. Such a method is now referred in Japan as 'Kanrishugi (control-oriented education)'. Of course, 'good discipline' can reflect the moral development of pupils, but not always. There can sometimes be a gap between outward appearance and internal development.

Thus route <5> has become the most widely used approach to improve the reputation

of a school and to climb the vertical ranking order. 'Kanrishugi' is a practice followed by many junior and senior high schools.

## VI. Conclusion — *What Will Be the Future Direction of Competitive Education In Japan?*

Competitive Japanese education has the following characteristics,

- its keen intensity,
- 'Juku' comprising a part of the students' daily life,
- involving almost all social classes,
- competition and ranking between schools.

The nature of the competition in education changed during the period after the Second World War from 'restricted' to 'open' and from 'open' to 'closed'. Thus the characteristics mentioned above are those of 'closed competition'. And now competition creates a new social order, a legitimate order.

How far will such steps in the intensification of competitive education go? Will the intensity increase relentlessly? I don't think so. Human beings will not be able to bear a steady increase in competition. Competitive Japanese education will face catastrophe in the not too distant future.

Several symptoms caused by changes in the competitive situation can be observed in various social fields. From the family's point of view, many parents are forcing their children into the keen competition on one hand, but there appears to be a sizeable number of parents who seek non-competitive values and consciously select non-competitive schools and careers for their children. Now in Japan several books have been published on such schools, learning institutions and careers.

From the school's point of view, many have been wrestling with the competition between schools, but some have consciously and actively made efforts to move away from the legitimate order and now seek to provide substantial educational values for their pupils, that is to help the pupils in develop through educational practices.

Over intensity of the competition in education is one of the most imminent reflecting (reconsidering) affairs in Japan. And over intensity of competition and the strengthening of labour in the companys is also another reflecting point through the occurrence of 'Karosi (death from overwork)'.

Thus future changes will not only occur in the educational field but also in the entire Japanese social system.