Stakes and Stakeholders in the Japanese Educational System, with Q&A
by Steve McCarty for NCC School Observers at Osaka Jogakuin College on July 6, 2006

Stakes

What’s at stake?

- Everyone’s perceived value or worth
- Education is a more salient determiner of people’s fortunes in Japan than in the West because of East Asian traditions, resulting in:
  - big company dominance and attendant difficulty to be an entrepreneur
  - a rigid career track
  - a credentialistic society
  - absorption of individuals into groups
  - valuing of similarities, affiliations, teamwork, connections and impersonal data over individual qualities and distinctions
  - preferential treatment for especially older males and eldest sons, with females mainly in subservient roles
  - traditions are often stronger than laws
- Thus education is a strong predictor of lifelong income particularly for men
- For college graduates, one’s highest degree and the prestige of a university is a lifetime badge
- Without a college degree it is difficult to get hired for white collar work
- The prestige of her husband’s college along with that of her own college accrues to a housewife
- People tend to associate with peer groups, which usually arise from their educational background
- Self-image tends to depend on acceptance by one’s peers and superiors, who view the person partly in terms of educational background
- Mental health can depend on paying for good schools to avoid bullying or other troubles
- Although the system is a meritocracy in theory, advantages can be bought, such as extra lessons for one’s children to succeed in the education race
- Connections formed in school can be a key to advancement, as former classmates or teachers can open career doors for someone they favor
- Greater awareness and choices accrue to those who learn more at better schools

Stakeholders

Who has a stake in the educational system? Everyone in the society does, including foreign residents.

What groups in particular are stakeholders?

- National Diet members
  - control budgetary priorities
  - form or amend education-related laws
  - neoconservative trend among politicians
  - flag and anthem forced on teachers
  - a new personal information privacy law restricts what teachers can do
- Education Ministry
  - career bureaucrats
  - national unified curriculum for elementary and secondary schools
  - screen all textbooks and can request changes before approving them for sale and use
  - sole accreditation authority, which occurs in advance of offering an educational program
  - controls budgets of schools and universities (even private colleges depend on government subsidies)
  - copious rules and regulations for schools and universities, especially for public schools
  - defines and narrows the scope of innovations in teaching methods, content and technology
  - pushes staff, teachers and professors to work harder by rewarding excellence, spurring research, teaching and in-service training, requesting the submission of detailed data, or punishing institutions for non-compliance
  - there is a new system to evaluate colleges and universities, not peer accreditation but external evaluations by Ministry appointees
- Local boards of education consist of nearly all conservative older men who tend to side with the Education Ministry
- Teachers’ unions tend to be leftist and resist the enormous controls placed on schoolteachers, but have little power to do more than shame the government with public pronouncements
For matrimony, parents check a potential daughter-in-law's written credentials with a view to her family's status being equivalent or higher than theirs, or gauge how promising a potential son-in-law's career is according to what schools he has attended

The sphere of action of Japanese people is confined to their ethnic group unless they achieve foreign language proficiency much higher than average in Japan, which would start to open the world to them

Empowerment by technology or finding out their rights, entitlements and so forth is largely a matter of education, whether formal or informal

Self-improvement or self-realization, where differences or uniqueness may be viewed as a threat to group cohesion, is also largely a matter of education

Happiness, and what have you ..., is what is at stake in the educational system

School administrators are mostly older men, with women represented more at the elementary school level, and they are obliged to enforce rules handed down from the Education Ministry or their Board of Education

PTA associations are nearly powerless and tend to do the bidding of school administrators, but housewives in particular contribute to school events and make friends through the networking

Taxpayers have a stake, and an increasing number of workers without children resent the inequity of subsidizing families with children, but the government ideology of monocultural harmony succeeds in stifling most dissension

Losers in the education race, however, sometimes strike back by murdering children

Companies that sell training for credentials or tests thereof, correspondence education, after-school cram lessons for all-important entrance examinations, or various lessons such as English conversation are big winners benefiting from the educational system, a huge industry that is probably worth more yen than the GDP of most countries

The media have grist for their mill in the great public interest in educational issues, and they advocate liberal or conservative positions on education in their editorials

Foreign residents, including ethnic Koreans and Chinese born and raised in Japan, have a stake in bilingual education, biculturalism, and their human rights in face of some prejudice and discrimination from the government and citizens

Foreign governments, particularly in Asia, take issue with government-approved textbooks that whitewash Japanese atrocities in World War II, although their own textbooks are also biased, e.g., by not admitting Japan’s peaceful post-War contributions to their own country's development

Lest they be forgotten, the students on the receiving end of an authoritarian educational system are also stakeholders, whose vice is to want to have fun like children everywhere

Steve McCarty
Professor, Osaka Jogakuin College, Japan
President, World Association for Online Education