

An Analysis of Social Construction of Hierarchy in Education: A View of Entrance Examination System in Japan

Mamoru TSUKADA

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the structure and mechanisms of the entrance examination system and discusses how the social reality of the entrance examination system is created and maintained for students and in turn the students interpret and internalize the reality in Japan. Throughout the Japanese schooling many students are likely to learn to construct the hierarchical reality of educational stratification during important transitions in the life course.

HIDDEN CURRICULUM IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS, JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOLS AND SENIOR HIGH SCHOOLS

Egalitarianism is made in the Japanese elementary schools but an idea of the equality of opportunity prevails over egalitarianism as the grade advances. Cummings (1980) argues that the social organization and teachers' attitude toward pupils together promotes equality among pupils in the elementary schools.

However, recently a small number of elementary school pupils who aspire to top high schools and take the entrance examinations of them. These pupils do not really study in the school for the entrance examination of the private high schools, but in *Shingaku Juku*, The supplementary educational institution in which the children will receive the entrance exam-oriented training intensively. They apply to the most competitive private high schools which have six-year curriculum geared to the college entrance examination (Mainichi Shinbun 1977 and Rohlen 1980 for further discussion of *Juku*). But this group of pupils are still the minority among all the children but they are influential for forming an idea of going to elite schools in Japan.

Stratifying mechanism takes place in junior high schools for most of students, especially during the final year of the junior high schools as the process of preparation for the entrance examinations of senior high schools. The entrance examinations to high schools are called "the system of slicing", *Wagiri Shiken* (Mainichi Shinbun 1981) or differentiating and stratifying students into different types and levels of senior high schools according to students' academic performance in the

junior high schools and the entrance examinations of the senior high schools by the very minute ranking. The entrance examinations to high schools are basically carefully managed to appropriate students' academic ability for the level of senior high schools. There is almost no competition in the entrance examinations of senior high schools.

During the third year, students are expected to take a series of mock-exams administered by private testing companies prefecture-wise to assess their academic ability.¹⁾ The students take the mock exams in schools under the supervision of the junior high school teachers. The testing companies provide junior high school teachers and students with information about each student's relative position among all the test takers of the mock exam and the level of each senior high school. Individual students also receive information about their relative position among all the test takers and an estimate for success potentials for the entrance examinations of specific high schools.

A homeroom teacher, a student and his or her parent get together to discuss the student's application plan to senior high schools in a "three-person conference" or *Sansha Mendan* in sometime in December (Kitazawa 1982 for a detailed discussion of the process of this conference). The teacher has the results of the student's mock exams as well as the student's G.P.A. In consulting the student's relative position among the other students who indicated that they would apply to the same senior high school the teacher can point out the potential possibility of passing the entrance examination of the school. Besides this estimate, the teacher has information about the student's G.P.A. and calculated it along with the scores of the mock exams. Since virtually all the third year students of junior high schools participate in one mock exam administered by a testing company, the teacher's estimate of either pass or fail regarding a student's application plan is likely to be very accurate. So that the student and the parent tend to agreed with the teacher's advice which senior high school the student should apply to.

The rigid and managed placement of students formulates the hierarchy of senior high schools in a given area. The student body of each school is homogeneous in their academic ability but the ranking of high schools in a given area is evident and visible.

For example, in Hiroshima City (Tsukada, 1988) on the top of the hierarchy of senior high schools there are two private boys' high schools and a national high school. These two boys' school have six-year curriculum geared to the college entrance examination. Almost all the graduates of these high schools go to prestigious universities. The second group of high schools consist of six public high schools in the center of Hiroshima City. Under this group there are private high schools to which those who failed in the entrance examinations of the public schools apply. The fourth group of high schools in this pyramid are high schools

for vocational courses such as technology, agriculture, and commerce. This hierarchy of high schools is also evident in Rohlen's studies of five high schools in Kobe (1983) and Shimahara's studies of high schools in Aichi Prefecture (1979). There are distinctive subcultures among common academic high schools according to the academic of the schools.

Actually, as early as the entry into different types of high schools, the majority of Japanese students, over 50 percent of the age group are cooled-out their ambition or aspiration for going to a university because they have attended non-college entrance exam oriented high schools experiencing their school cultures.

By contrast, students in the college entrance exam-oriented high schools aspire to going to prestigious universities and if they fail the entrance examination of the university of their choice, they will try for the university or a better one by becoming *ronin* studying in the *yobiko*. The expectation and pride promoted in the school subcultures do not allow them to apply to the university by lowering the level of their aspiration.

By the time these students graduated from senior high schools, they had been immersed in the Japanese entrance exam-oriented educational system. At their entry into their appropriate high school in the hierarchy of high schools in a given area as the result of their entrance examinations of senior high school, they understand that their relative position of academic achievement by taking a series of nation-wide mock exams in senior high schools.

However, since the names of the universities students enter are important as their identity or status symbols among those students who have been socialized by the college entrance examination system, students of the college entrance exam-oriented high schools tend to apply to the universities higher than that the cumulative results of mock exams suggest that they should apply to. As a result substantive number of students become *ronin*. In their *yobiko* life, students experience more explicit exam-oriented curricula and organizational arrangements of the *yobiko*.

COLLEGE ENTRANCE EXAMINATION AND THE CURRICULUM AND STRUCTURE OF THE YOBIKO

The entrance examinations of senior high schools are locally administered at a prefecture level, but the college entrance examination is a nation-wide event. Though the G.P.A. of junior high schools are considered and calculated as the total scores for admissions to senior high schools, there is almost no consideration about the G.P.A. for the college admission in Japan. The results of the college entrance examination will determine applicants' admission except for the school recommended system. So that teachers of senior high schools do not function the de-

cision makers for their students' application plan to the college entrance examination. Instead, students tend to be more autonomous about their decision for their future than when they were in junior high schools. The students will make their own rational thinking about their application plan or decision whether or not they become *ronin* by familiarizing themselves with the college entrance system.

The education industry has developed to help college applicants enter a university by identifying their chances of entering it, providing hard-to-get objective or comparative data. Major *yobiko* and publishers that specialize in entrance examination materials provide students preparing for the college entrance examinations with mock exams several times per year. Students take the mock exams in order to assess their academic ability. Over 300,000 students, both *ronin* students and third year high school students, take the nationally administered mock exam. Students participate individually and in groups by high schools or *yobiko*. This system is the same as that for the entrance examinations of senior high schools. But the entrance examinations of senior high schools are administered each prefecture. The competitions for high schools are much more administered because the high schools involving the competition are limited. But the college entrance examinations are done nationally so that information about specific university departments is hard to obtain without the publication by the education industry which operate nationally.

The standardized value or the mock exam functions to evaluate the rank of each department of universities throughout Japan as well as the individual student's academic ability. It is used to predict a student's chances of entering a specific department of specific universities throughout Japan. In taking the exam, each student lists three university departments he or she would like to apply to. Each university department is thereby ranked by the standardized test scores of the students who listed that department.

The *yobiko* or the publishers determine the minimum standardized value necessary to pass the entrance examination of specific university departments based upon each mock exam. The published rankings of university departments are organized so that students can quickly determine which departments fall in relative ranking of university departments throughout Japan. As a further consequence, the standardized value of test scores of each mock exam is now so institutionalized that it has become a criterion to evaluate the rank of the department of a university as well as a student's relative position in a specific mock exam.

THE PROCESS OF "COOLING-OUT" IN THE YOBIKO LIFE AND SOCIALIZATION IN THE YOBIKO

Ronin students start their lives with mixed feelings of shame and hope after re-

covering from the shock of failing the entrance examinations and being determined to become *ronin*.

The *ronin* students in this study hoped to apply the following year to a university ranked higher than the one whose entrance examination they took that year. In this initial stage of *yobiko* life from April through July, students can still believe in their potential to improve their achievement scores during their *yobiko* life by studying hard as well as by applying to a university ranked higher than the one they failed to enter that year.

During the second stage of *yobiko* life, from August through December, when anxiety about failing the college entrance examination the following year prevails over hope for success. This growing anxiety leads *ronin* students to change their attitude toward selecting the university they apply to, a tendency reflected in their reinforcing and legitimizing the relative ranking of their achievement through a series of mock exams given during this stage. It also takes a form of self-evaluation in the ranking. Locating their relative position on the one-dimensional scale of ranking, *ronin* students are stratified in their aspirations.

Time has passed and excitement has been fading. *ronin* students have been in the *yobiko* long enough to normalize their lives. Anxiety about the college entrance examination for the following year is building. They ask, "Will I really be able to enter the university of my first choice?"

One of the most important concerns for *ronin* students during the advanced term is their decision about which universities they will apply to. By this time they are no longer optimistic about passing the entrance examination of their first choice university. They have taken several mock exams by which they can estimate their potential for entering specific universities according to *yobiko* data. They now think alternative universities to apply to in case they fail to pass the entrance examination of the university of their first choice.

Clark (1960: 572-574) articulates the process in analysis of the functions of junior colleges in the United States in "cooling-out" overambitious students. By counselling and by impersonal means such as tests and grades, a process of self-assessment is initiated, such that students come to believe what advised and counselled by counsellors and teachers.

The concept of "cooling-out" applied to overambitious community college students can explain some important aspects of the *ronin* student's selection process. Before entering the *yobiko*, they take a screening test to be placed in proper classes that are definitely ranked on the basis of the standardized values of the test. From the moment they became *ronin* students in the *yobiko* they know their relative position in the ranking. The rank of each class is visible to others as well as to themselves. Because of this placement into ranked classes, each *ronin* student is less likely to be overambitious in the first place even though many of them try to

apply to a university ranked higher than the one they failed to pass the previous year.

By November, *ronin* students have taken several mock exams to assess their success potential in the real entrance examination of the next year. The sequential test results are impersonal means, numbers which are calculated from thousands of test results. The expressed numbers seem objective or scientific to them as an assessment of possibility of entering a specific university department. The individual's test result is accompanied by a statement, saying, "You will not pass the entrance examination of this university unless you study this and that. Your success potential for this university is E." The test scores expressed in standardized values are so institutionalized and accepted by *ronin* students that they are highly unlikely to question their validity. They conduct their self-assessment based on the results, and many of them will change their selection of universities accordingly.

There is, however, a distinctive difference between overambitious community college students discussed by Clark and *ronin* students in Japan. The former will go through each step of the process of "cooling-out" considering real grades and test scores. By contrast, the mock exams *ronin* students have taken are not real entrance exams, but only fake, which they believe to be a probabilistic estimation of the real entrance examination for the next year. Consequently, some of them continue to believe optimistically that they will do much better in the real entrance examination than in the mock exams.

Another difference is that the American community college students can go through each step of the process slowly, whereas for the *ronin* students the final result in the entrance examination is everything. American college students can reach a socially accepted position or status in the long run, if they cool-out their ambition. For *ronin* students, the "cooling-out" of their ambitious application plan takes place before taking the real entrance examination of the university. No one knows what will happen to them. Some with good success potential may fail and some may pass. Because of this uncertainty over the result of the real entrance examination, they tend to have several alternatives, including the safest university to apply to. In addition, because of their desire to avoid repeating the *ronin* life, they will make the safest choice. In their view, if they do not pass the entrance examination of any university, all the *ronin* life would be a waste and useless in its own right. This anxiety over failing again lays a foundation for their careful consideration of all possible results in the real entrance examinations.

Ronin students are not necessarily "cooled-out" from their overambitious plans by the counselors in the *yobiko* because they do not have real grades and test scores that affect them. Instead, they have more freedom in selecting an appropriate university to apply to than community college students do in selecting proper courses. This is no formal restriction or requirement that *ronin* students have to

observe. They tend to act more upon their own will and judgment than to be affected by their counselors in their decision-making process of selecting a university to apply to. In this sense, *ronin* students are less likely to be “cooled-out” by others than the American community college students.

The final stage of the *yobiko* life is the time when *ronin* life comes to an end. *Ronin* students’ psychological state and behavior during the final stage indicates their wish to terminate their anxiety-laden *ronin* life. The final stage is also a reinforcement of the level of aspiration acquired during *yobiko* life which *ronin* students have finally legitimized and confirmed their relative position in the hierarchy of university departments throughout Japan.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

In this paper I have discussed the ways in which a uniform homogeneous group of individuals undergo schooling and learn to be differentiated academically in each entrance examination from elementary schools to colleges universities. Japanese students experience an egalitarian education at the elementary school and go through process of stratification at junior high schools. As the result of the entrance examinations of senior high school, the Japanese students are differentiated into different tracks of life courses. The majority of them, about 60 percent of the age group, begin working after the graduation from high schools and the other students go to some sort of post-secondary education. About 40 percent of the most educationally aspired students who have been socialized in the college entrance examination system become *ronin* after their failure at the entrance examination of the university of their first choice. These *ronin* students experience the explicitly exam-oriented curricula and social arrangements of the *yobiko* life.

The *yobiko* and *ronin* experience stratifies students and legitimizes this stratification through the college entrance examination. The nature of the college entrance examination and the social reality construction of hierarchy of university departments by the education industry promotes students’ consciousness of ranking ability. The *yobiko*’s internal mechanism, such as class assignment based on academic performance, a series of mock exams, and tutor’s counseling, function as stratifying forces for students and further legitimize social stratification.

The *ronin* experience is mainly the process of adjusting students’ aspirations to their actual academic performance in mock exams. Facing uncertainty and anxiety about the second failure, students engage in a rational calculation of success potential based on their relative position in each mock exam. This rationalizing process to assure their success leads students to be stratified in one-dimensional scale according to the ranking of universities. Their relative position in each exam is highly visible and discrete, expressed in objective numbers in which students con-

firm their relative position by receiving the results of each mock exam, and they legitimize their position as right and appropriate.

Through their *yobiko* life *ronin* students reinforce, intensify and legitimize their consciousness of ranking in evaluating themselves as well as others. This consciousness of ranking is hard to be wiped out even after they finished their schooling. The consciousness is one of their core identities and is intensified among those students who are immersed in the college entrance examination system, especially students with *ronin* experience. Through *ronin* experience they may recognize their "ability" as a person. Thus, it can be concluded that the Japanese entrance examination system plays an crucial role in stratifying people educationally in the process of schooling step by step and creates social order among Japanese people while providing them with the myth of equality of opportunity at important turning points of the life course.

Footnotes

- 1) Nationally, except for Hokkaido, Osaka and Nagano prefectures one or two testing companies administer prefecture-wide mock exams. More than 90 percent of all the students preparing for the entrance exams of senior high schools participate in these mock exams ranging from three to twelve times per year among thirty-three prefectures. In 1993 *Kouko-ku Kaikaku Kaigi* in the Ministry of Education announced that:
 - (1) Junior high schools are not allowed senior high schools to obtain information about their students' results of mock exams;
 - (2) High schools are not allowed to ask for information about the standardized test scores of *Juku* and testing companies from parents, junior high school students, and *Juku*; and
 - (3) Teachers in junior high schools are not allowed to be involved in the company testing service both in classroom and outside school. By way of this announcement neither senior high schools nor junior high schools are allowed to obtain information about junior high school students' results of mock exams. Teachers in junior high schools are likely to have difficulties in counseling their students in the students' application plan to senior high schools. At the same time senior high schools, especially private high schools are likely to have difficulties in selecting recommended students without referring to this standardized exams since G.P.A. in each junior school may have different meanings. This issue has been a heated controversy on education (Asahi Shinbun 1993).

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