CHAPTER 5

Student–Teacher Relationships and *Ijime* in Japanese Middle Schools

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*Ijime*, school bullying, has been a major problem in Japan since the 1980s. Mass media attention to student suicides related to *ijime* and several subsequent lawsuits during the 1990s uncovered the seriousness of *ijime* and created a sense of urgency among educators and policymakers to take action. More recently, two student suicides in 2005 and 2006 led the Ministry of Education (MOE) to organize the Committee of Citizens for Protecting Children (CCPC) in 2007. The CCPC has produced several reports, emphasizing the need for greater collaboration between schools and community members to overcome the problem of *ijime* (MEXT, 2006, 2007a). In 2007, a 24-hour national *ijime* hotline for victims was established (MEXT, 2007b). In the same year, the suicide of a high school student due to cyber bullying led the committee to produce a report on the prevention of cyber bullying (MEXT, 2007c).

Although many studies have examined the characteristics of bullies and victims in Japan and discussed the possible causes of *ijime*, few empirical studies have examined the reality of *ijime* from the student perspective. Even less is known about the relationship between student-teacher interactions and student involvement in *ijime*. In Japanese schools, homeroom teachers provide guidance for student psychological and social development, in addition to academic development (Bjork & Fukuzawa, this volume; Fukuzawa & LeTendre, 2001; LeTendre, 1994, 1995, 2000). Homeroom teachers spend a significant amount of time counseling students, visiting their families, and developing a community where students come to a sense of belonging. When *ijime* occurs in a homeroom, the homeroom teacher is responsible for resolving the case by discussing the situation with students and seeking a group decision on how to solve the problem. This intervention is based on the widely held assumption that problem behaviors emerge as a result...
of detachment from the homeroom, and the belief among Japanese teachers that a homeroom as a group can most effectively deal with student problems (LeTendre, 2000; Lewis, 1995).

Teachers are generally perceived as playing a central role in identifying and intervening when *ijime* occurs. To fully understand their role, however, it is also important to examine how their relationships with students in daily educational activities and interactions may potentially influence student involvement in *ijime*. This chapter, based on two empirical studies conducted during the past decade (Akiba, 2004; Akiba, Shimizu, & Zhuang, 2010), examines the way student–teacher relationships influence the dynamics of *ijime*. Specifically, we explore the following questions:

1. How do Japanese students perceive and experience *ijime*?
2. How do student–teacher relationships influence student involvement in *ijime*?

To address the first research question, we compared student perspectives of *ijime* with information presented in official reports. Drawing from an extended case study of 30 students in one classroom (Akiba, 2004), we examined how *ijime* starts, escalates, and ends, along with the reasons students give for bullying others. For the second research question, we conducted a survey of 2,999 students in seven middle schools in one district to examine the association between student involvement in *ijime* and three types of student–teacher relationships: 1) teacher bonding, 2) student guidance, and 3) instructional support (Akiba, Shimizu, & Zhuang, 2010).

**RESEARCHING IJIME**

These two empirical studies (the case study and the student survey) were conducted in Ibaraki prefecture, which, among Japan’s 47 prefectures, has an average student and teacher population size (Government Statistics, 2011a) and an average student achievement level (National Institute for Educational Policy Research, 2011). The case study was conducted in 2000, and the survey was administered in 2006. Haruno Middle School was chosen for the case study site because of the first author’s longstanding professional relationship with Mr. Suzuki, the homeroom teacher in charge of the 30 9th-grade students included in the case study. The study focused on one homeroom because *ijime* tends to occur among homeroom classmates (Morita & Kiyonaga, 1996; Takekawa, 1993). A 9th-grade class was selected for the study because these students can speak of their prior experience during their 3 years of middle school.

The following data collection methods revealed Japanese student perspectives on and experiences with *ijime*: 1) participant observations, 2) student diaries, and 3) in-depth individual interviews. The first author (Akiba) spent 1 month with the members of Mr. Suzuki’s homeroom. She observed daily lessons and co-taught English for 45 minutes every day with the homeroom teacher. Students in the class were given a notebook and invited to share their experiences related to *ijime*, as well as any other concerns or problems. At the end of the fieldwork period, in-depth interviews with all the students were conducted. During those conversations, which lasted approximately 1 hour each, students were asked open-ended questions that followed up on comments made in their diaries. Approximately 200 pages of diaries and 30 hours of interviews from these 30 students were collected during the visit to Haruno Middle School. Additional data came from a series of phone interviews with the homeroom teacher and email communications with students over the course of 1 year.

The authors used a multi-stage sampling method to select students for the survey, randomly selecting seven middle schools from another district. They then invited all 3,161 students in these schools to participate and received a 95% return rate. Overall, the school district served 5,269 students in 14 middle schools (grades 7 through 9). Three of the schools that were selected are located in urban centers, two schools are in suburban areas, and two schools are in rural areas. Teachers administered the survey during the spring of 2006 with instructions to: 1) explain to the students that the survey participation was voluntary, 2) give students sufficient time to complete the questionnaires, and 3) collect the questionnaires immediately after completion. Teachers then returned the questionnaires to the school administrator, who sent them to the second author (Shimizu). The questionnaire included questions that investigated three dimensions of student–teacher relationships: teacher bonding, student guidance, and instructional support.

**DEFINITION AND FREQUENCY OF IJIME: OFFICIAL REPORTS VERSUS STUDENT PERSPECTIVES**

What is *ijime*? How frequently does it happen? These questions can be addressed using two types of data: official reports and student perspectives. An official definition of *ijime* brings together various perspectives into a consensus description that allows for systemic collection of *ijime* statistics. This approach, however, does not necessarily reflect variations in student perspectives or experiences. In addition, the official statistics come from reports of cases made by principals. Because students do not always report *ijime* to teachers or principals, these reports
underestimate the total number of cases. Therefore, it is important to examine both the official definition and accompanying statistics along with student perspectives and experiences regarding *ijime* based on student interviews.

The Ministry of Education defines *ijime* as “continuous physical and psychological aggression inflicted upon someone weaker, which causes the victim serious pain. It includes aggression that occurs both inside and outside of school” (MEXT, 2006). This definition is similar to the definition used widely in Europe. 3

Students who participated in the current study perceived any type of harassment, including physical as well as psychological actions, as *ijime*. The four most common types of *ijime* among the surveyed students were: 1) ostracism; 2) verbal abuse; 3) stealing, hiding, and damaging personal belongings; and 4) physical violence. Such behaviors were always conducted by a group of perpetrators targeting one student. *IJime* perpetrated by one student toward another does exist, but such cases are considered minor, given the social support that the victim can receive from other students. All of the cases that the first author observed and received information about were collective *ijime*—one student experiencing *ijime* from a group of students. Most cases occurred within a single gender group: girls bullying girls or boys bullying boys. The only exception is when the entire homeroom student population joins in ostracizing one student.

In addition, the authors observed some gender differences in behavior. Minor *ijime* by girls may involve ostracism and verbal abuse by a few students, but serious cases involve multiple harassments, including both verbal and physical threats as well as ostracism by all of a victim’s classmates. The latter case is illustrated by the experience of a student named Miho, a thin 14-year-old girl who wrote in her diary that all her classmates had ostracized her since elementary school and frequently stole her possessions. They took her notebook and returned it severely damaged and filled with scribbling such as “Die!” “Ugly!” and “Feel sick to be with you!” These acts of *ijime* led her to miss school for 1 year.

*IJime* among boys involves physical violence in addition to verbal abuse, ostracism, and theft. Hiroki, a 15-year-old boy, often experienced physical violence during recess time in his homeroom. A group of students dragged him by his hair, kicked, and punched him. He reported that his possessions, such as bags or bikes, were often stolen or damaged and that he found his shoes frequently missing or with pushpins inside them. He also became a victim of aggravated assaults. For example, a small group of students took him to a storage room adjacent to an art classroom, where they kicked and punched him. This happened because of a false rumor generated by students that Hiroki was saying, “I will kill the bullies.”

Most boys believed that physical violence and ostracism by all classmates each qualified as *ijime*, but verbal abuse or ostracism by only a few people did not. Such perceptions about whether a certain behavior constituted *ijime*, however, varied based on the personalities and attitudes of victims. Although Hiroki was ostracized by all his classmates during the 7th and 8th grades, some boys thought that it was not *ijime*. They viewed it as Hikoki being punished for his negative attitude. The actions taken against him were perceived to be something he deserved. Such situation-specific definitions were less common among girls. This finding is supported by Hara’s (2002) survey of 103 students in two middle schools that indicated boys were more likely than girls to blame *ijime* victims.

**HOW FREQUENTLY DOES IJIME HAPPEN?**

The Ministry of Education collects annual data on the number of *ijime* cases reported by school principals. According to these national statistics for 2010, the number of cases reported was 34,766 in elementary schools, 32,111 in middle schools, and 5,642 in high schools (Government Statistics, 2011a). The number of cases per school is 1.6 for elementary schools, 2.9 for middle schools, and 1.0 for high schools. Official reports, however, do not accurately capture the number or rate of *ijime* because many cases are not reported to school administrators. Therefore, it is important to look at student reports to accurately understand the frequency of *ijime* in schools.

All the 30 students interviewed by Akiba shared firsthand experiences with *ijime*, either as a bully, a victim, or an observer. They stated that it happens on a daily basis and is so widespread that it has become a regular part of classroom life. To understand more accurate rates of *ijime*, Akiba conducted a secondary analysis of the 2007 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), in which a nationally representative sample of 4,263 Japanese 8th-grade students was surveyed. The students were asked if they had ever been bullied in school.

Based on the question, “In school, did any of these things happen during the last month?” 24.9% responded that they were “made fun of or called names,” 18.8% were “hit or hurt by other student(s) (e.g., shoving, hitting, kicking),” 6.2% were “left out of activities by other students,” and 8.6% were “made to do things they didn’t want to do by other students.” These percentages, based on a secondary analysis of the TIMSS data, show that approximately one in four 8th-grade students (seven to eight in a classroom of 30 students) is a victim of *ijime* at least once a month and that government statistics may severely underreport cases of bullying. According to the students in our research, *ijime* occurs predominantly on school grounds (Morita, Taki, Hata, Hoshino, & Wakai, 1999). None of the students in Mr. Suzuki’s homeroom described observing instances of *ijime* outside of school. Most bullying occurred among classmates or club mates during recess time, lunch break, and club activities, i.e., times when teachers were not supervising the students.
GROUP DYNAMICS: HOW IJIME STARTS AND ESCALATES

A typical response to the question of how ijime starts is that, at first, a group of two or three students in the same homeroom starts to pick on one classmate. The situation then starts to involve other students, and finally all the classmates get involved. Yoshiko, a cheerful 14-year-old girl, explained how she started bullying one girl with her friends.

I was in the same club (with her). She wasn’t serious about the club activity when everyone was practicing hard. I really hated it. So I asked others around, saying, “Isn’t she annoying?” and “Do you want to do it (ijime)?” Then, we decided to ostracize her. We also harassed her and she stopped coming to school.

A case of ijime perpetrated by a group of bullies can last from 1 month to 1 year. One case involving ostracism and verbal abuse of a girl ended after 1 month, when another girl became the new victim. However, most cases lasted longer; for example, the ijime of another girl continued for almost 1 year starting immediately at the beginning of the academic year and ending at homeroom reorganization in the next academic year, when she had less contact with the bullies.

Ijime usually begins when one student targets a member of his or her peer group, and then spreads to a larger group, or an entire homeroom or club. Always a collective behavior focused on a single student, it can last as long as the relationship between bullies and a victim continues. Ijime often ends when the group dynamic is changed—when the bullies in the same peer group are separated into different classrooms at the beginning of each academic year or when victims choose to avoid the bullies by staying away from school or quitting a club.

WHY DO STUDENTS BULLY THEIR PEERS?

Eight out of the 30 students in Mr. Suzuki’s homeroom confessed that they had bullied someone. In his diary, Haruki, a high achiever, described his experience of bullying a classmate.

I bullied someone before. At that time, I knew it was wrong but I just couldn’t stop it. When I bullied him, he was a bit weird, and followed people around and everyone hated him. So I hated him and bullied him. I don’t think ijime is necessarily the bullies’ fault. Surely, ijime behavior is bad, but like in my case, when bullied students don’t stop something everyone hates, I think they have the problems.

During a follow-up interview, Haruki explained how he and two of his classmates had kicked and punched one of their classmates. When asked why he did this, Haruki said that the victim “was too shitsukoi (obstinate and annoying).”

Students often considered these purportedly selfish, overtly persistent, and noisy students as incapable of understanding how to behave appropriately. They also saw them as different from others, which resulted in their standing out in the classroom or on club teams. Students who instigated ijime did so mainly because they believed that everyone hated the victims. Yoshiko bullied one girl because she thought “everyone hated her personality.” This perception of “bullying on behalf of everyone else” was commonly shared among ijime perpetrators.

Another reason that students engaged in ijime was to protect their own reputations. When Akiba asked why they supported ijime perpetrators, many students answered, “I just didn’t want them to think I am a friend of the victim.” Most students did not feel that they were forced by bullies to join them, yet they agreed that if they tried to stop the bullies, they would likely have become the next victims. This concern, however, did not seem so important. Rather, they felt that if was just natural for most of the to follow the ijime perpetrators. They either thought it was fun to join or believed, as noted above, that the victims deserved to be bullied. Kouji, who is actively engaged in the soccer club and is popular among classmates because of his cheerful personality, described ijime as fun.

Q: Why did you join in the ijime?
Kouji: If I didn’t, I would be bullied.
Q: Were you scared of the bullies?
Kouji: No, I was not.
Q: Then why did you get involved? Can’t you just not get involved at all?
Kouji: Well, it’s fun to bully someone.

Sachiko, an athletic and high-achieving student, explained how one of her friends became a victim.

Sachiko: We were a group of six students. When I arrived at school one morning, I found that one of the group members was totally isolated from the others. Then my friends told me that they had decided to ostracize her, so I joined too.
Q: Why did she get ostracized?
Sachiko: Well, I am not sure, but they said a lot of bad things about her like she was “selfish” and never listened to people, or talked bad about us behind our backs. So I thought she should be bullied.
All the students we interviewed appeared quite sensitive to what others thought and how they acted. They used this dominant group dynamic to rationalize acts of ijime, regardless of individual feelings of morality or justice. Following others was the main reason—sometimes the only reason—why students became involved in bullying. Resisting such pressure was extremely difficult. Students who attempted to stop the ijime were considered "strange," "stupid enough to risk their own victimization," or "trying to get credit from teachers."

Some students were victimized because they had personality traits that were considered different from "normal" students, such as being "selfish" or "noisy." Other pupils were bullied because of physical characteristics, such as being short, fat, or having some amount of gray hair. As a result of the broad range of characteristics that could provoke bullying, almost all students faced the possibility of becoming victims. In fact, more than one-third of the students who participated in the study reported that they had been victims of ijime at least once during their middle school years.

STUDENT–TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS AND IJIME

To examine the question, "How do student–teacher relationships influence student involvement in ijime?" we analyzed survey data collected from 2,996 students in seven middle schools. The survey included a series of questions related to three dimensions of student–teacher relationships: 1) teacher bonding, 2) student guidance, and 3) instructional support. Students were asked to respond to 30 statements about their relationships with their homeroom teachers based on three aspects of teacher bonding: trust, respect, and fairness. The items on trust included "I feel that my teacher sees me as important" and "I think my teacher always cares about me." The items on respect included "My teacher is knowledgeable" and "My teacher is well respected." The items on fairness included "My teacher clearly communicates what is right and wrong" and "My teacher favors some group of students over others." The responses were coded from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree. Due to the high correlations of .70 among three subscales, the mean of the three subscales was computed as a composite measure of teacher bonding (Cronbach's alpha = .95).

Figure 5.1 shows the level of teacher bonding reported by victims and bullies compared with other students. We can see that victims felt stronger bonds toward their teachers than other students did. The difference was statistically significant for victims of verbal abuse and physical violence. In contrast, bullies felt weaker bonds with their teachers than the other students did, and the differences were all statistically significant.

Student guidance is an important responsibility of homeroom teachers in Japanese middle schools. To measure student perceptions of student guidance, another question on the survey asked respondents, "How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about your homeroom teacher?" The question was followed by statements such as "I feel that I can talk to my teacher if I have a problem," "My teacher can protect me if I become a victim of bullying or violence at school," and "My teacher works hard to keep a safe environment." The responses were coded from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree, and the mean was computed as a composite of student guidance (Cronbach's alpha = .72).

Figure 5.2 shows the level of student guidance reported by victims and bullies compared with other students. The differences in ratings from victims and other students were not statistically significant. However, bullies rated student guidance provided by their homeroom teachers more negatively than other students. Those differences were all statistically significant.

Students were also asked how much they agreed with the following statements about their teachers: 1) My teachers give extra help when students need it; 2) Most teachers continue teaching until the students understand; and 3) When I work hard on schoolwork, most of my teachers praise my efforts. The responses were coded from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree, and the mean was computed as a composite of instructional support (Cronbach's alpha = .77).

Figure 5.3 indicates that the level of instructional support reported by victims and bullies was similar to those of other students across the three types of ijime. Bullies' ratings of instructional support, however, were generally lower than that of other students. For bullies who engage in verbal abuse and peer exclusion, the difference was statistically significant.
These figures show that whereas victims have stronger teacher bonding than other students, bullies tend to have weaker bonds with their teachers than other students do. Bullies also rated the guidance and instructional support provided by teachers less positively than other students did. They were less likely to indicate that they trusted and respected teachers, or thought their teachers were fair. They did not believe that their homeroom teachers could create a safe classroom environment or protect them from bullying or violence. Furthermore, they were less likely to indicate that teachers provided them extra instructional support, ensured that students understood subject matter, or praised students who worked hard. In contrast, victims were more likely to rate their teachers positively in these areas. They appeared to have stronger bonds with their teachers, trust and respect instructors, and believe that instructors treated pupils fairly.

**UNDERSTANDING IJIME**

What happened to the cultural ideal of homeroom communities in Japanese schools where students develop a sense of belonging as explained in the previous studies (LeTendre, 2000; Lewis, 1995)? The current study suggests that homeroom is no longer a place where students feel safe. Mr. Suzuki observed that homeroom teachers rarely bring their students together to seek collective solutions to ijime cases anymore because of negative attitudes among students toward those who display behaviors considered desirable by teachers. Changes in homeroom group dynamics reflect the families and neighborhoods where the students come from. Urbanization and a flow of people from various regions into cities have weakened the social ties that anchored many communities. When parents become strangers and do not trust one another, it becomes difficult for their children to develop trusting relationships with their peers. The same applies to the relationship between parents and teachers. Gordon (2005) reported, based on interviews of teachers and parents, that Japanese teachers no longer enjoy the high social status and respect they had in the past, mainly due to increased parental education levels and shifting perspectives toward teachers and schools. The media have also reported on “monster parents” who openly accuse teachers of any problem such as their child’s minor injury during a physical education class. When parents do not respect teachers, it is not surprising that students do not respect them either.

The survey data presented in this chapter indicate that bullies have weaker bonds with teachers, and negative views about the quality of guidance and instructional support provided by teachers. The absence of trusting relationships between many students and their teachers is a reflection of the lack of trust among parents and community members, which further exacerbates the situation. In schools where such distrust is commonplace, it follows that students will succumb to peer pressure and take part in ijime. The goal of emulating model students no longer motivates many middle school students, which makes it difficult for homeroom teachers to resolve ijime cases through collective problem-solving activities. In contrast, victims tend not to have negative views about their teachers. They often develop strong bonds with their homeroom teachers, respecting and trusting them. Yet displaying such positive attitudes toward their instructors may actually make students targets of ijime by peers who have negative attitudes toward teachers.
Analysis of interview and survey data sheds light on the factors that influence student involvement in *ijime*. In the past, when students were bullied, homeroom communities could usually solve the problems with the guidance of teachers, who were trusted and respected by their pupils. Morality and justice could be reinstalled in the homeroom without punishing or removing bullies from the classroom. Over the past 25 years, the homeroom as a community has lost its capacity to solve problems. One reason for this is the gradual breakdown of parental (or external) communities. Another is the strong criticism of teachers by parents and the media.

In addition to these relational factors, structural realities also make it possible for *ijime* to proliferate. Japanese schools are organized so that students remain unsupervised during recess, lunchtime, breaks between classes, and cleaning times, based on the belief that students can and should supervise one another. When the homeroom can no longer solve problems, these unsupervised periods provide bullies with frequent opportunities to openly engage in *ijime* without fear of being caught.

Japanese approaches to discipline also make it difficult to solve *ijime* cases. Bullies are rarely punished in Japanese schools, due to the cultural belief that punishment and exclusion will exacerbate behavior problems. Traditionally, teachers dealt with behavior issues through intensive consultation and remediation. Identification of bullies can also be difficult because multiple students often become involved. Homeroom teachers usually talk with victims first and ask them what can be done to help them. Afraid of possible retaliation, victims usually do not want teachers to speak with the bullies. This can result in long-term isolation inside the classroom or long-term absenteeism from school.

When homeroom communities lose the capacity to control and resolve behavior issues internally, bullies take advantage of these conditions. They become aware that they are unlikely to be punished for their behavior, that students have plenty of unsupervised time, and that victims are stuck in their homeroom classes the entire school year.

**POLICY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS FOR *IJIME* PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION**

How can Japanese schools reduce *ijime*? There are three possible approaches: 1) reinstate the capacity of homeroom communities to control and resolve student problem behaviors, 2) restructure school organizations by increasing supervised time and introducing a flexible homeroom configuration, and 3) implement school-wide *ijime* prevention and intervention programs, sending a clear message that *ijime* is not tolerated.
NOTES

1. Pseudonyms are used throughout the text when referring to schools and individuals.
2. Olweus (1999) defined bullying as "1) aggressive behavior or intentional harm doing 2) which is carried out repeatedly and over time 3) in an interpersonal relationship characterized by an imbalance of power" (p. 11).
3. Pearson r correlation coefficients were .74 between trust and respect, .71 between respect and fairness, and .84 between respect and fairness.
4. The number of futōkō students—defined as students who are absent for more than 30 days—increased from 54,172 (1.0%) in 1991 to 100,105 (2.8%) in 2009 (Government Statistics, 2011b).
5. National statistics indicate that Japanese middle school teachers are spending an average of 11 hours each day at school (MEXT, 2007d).

REFERENCES


