School Guidance in Japanese Middle Schools
Balancing the Old and New Amidst Social Change

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The social and moral development of children has always been a central component of the mission of Japanese schools (LeTendre, 1999; Shimahara & Sakai, 1995). In addition to providing a solid base of knowledge to their pupils, teachers are responsible for developing in students the attitudes and dispositions necessary to function as citizens, community members, and workers. Analyses of student guidance approaches (seikatsu shidō), therefore, can deepen our understanding of the values that anchor educational institutions, and clarify the characteristics considered most essential for success in Japanese society.

Scholarship published during the economic boom years explored in detail approaches to classroom management and student guidance. Previous accounts of the Japanese education system highlighted the serious attention devoted to establishing norms related to student comportment and dress in the schools (Cummins, 1980; Stevenson, Stigler, Lee, Lucker, Kitamura, & Hsu, 1985; White, 1987). Through a combination of well-established and strictly enforced discipline procedures, along with careful attention to group formation and the development of the “whole child” (Lewis, 1995), teachers in the 1980s created a balanced approach through what Rohlen (1983) called “intimacy coupled with severity” (p. 201). During the heyday of Japan’s economic expansion, the foreign press, eager to explain the nation’s ascension from vanquished debtor to global leader, drew attention to examples of orderliness and discipline in Japanese schools, but often ignored the more subtle ways that teachers orchestrated purposeful interactions between students. Images of adolescents in military-style uniforms standing obediently next to their wooden desks have proven difficult to erase from the popular imagination, regardless of how accurately they may have captured conditions in actual schools.
Outside of Japan, understanding of the practices teachers rely on to manage their pupils continues to be informed largely by research generated in the 1980s and 1990s. Yet, as we will show, much has since changed for students, teachers, and schools. Although many non-Japan specialists continue to assume that middle schools are highly regimented institutions filled with students who compliantly adhere to school rules, a visit to a Japanese secondary school today would likely dispel that notion. The architecture of the schools may have changed very little over the past 50 years, but that visible continuity obscures variation in the actors and activities within.

In the years since the collapse of Japan’s economic bubble, the education system—and the larger society—has been transfigured. Expanding gaps between the haves and the have-nots and the adoption of a collection of reforms designed to reduce pressure in the schools (yutori kyōiku) have altered the context for teaching and learning. These reforms, which include reductions in curriculum and teaching hours, also stress diversity and flexibility through greater parent/student choice (Tsuneoishi, this volume) and reductions in school-based club activities (Okano, 2008). At the same time, expanded access to mass media and independent social networks has weakened the ability of schools and parents to monitor student behavior. Challenged by these social changes and shifts in youth culture, teachers are revisiting their methods, searching for the appropriate mix of discipline and nurturance.

Although researchers have devoted a great deal of attention to the process of relaxed education policy formulation, they have largely ignored trends related to student guidance. In this chapter we take a close look at the evolution of the student guidance system in Japanese middle schools over the past 30 years. Drawing from ethnographic data collected over 3 decades, we examine changes in the practices deemed appropriate for guiding adolescents through this process of adjustment. In the 1990s, the Ministry of Education (MOE) prohibited teachers from using disciplinary measures that might be regarded as excessive or violent. As we will show, the combination of increasingly assertive students and the promotion of more accommodating guidance approaches has complicated the work of educators. Deterred from employing tactics that had proven effective in the past, many middle school teachers are struggling to maintain order in settings where their authority is frequently challenged.

**PATTERNS IN SCHOOL GUIDANCE PRACTICES**

The research methodology framing this study is rather unorthodox. In consideration of the themes that anchor this book, we sought to trace patterns in school guidance practices over time. Media reports as well as academic scholarship suggest that schools have experienced extensive modifications since Japan’s economic boom years; yet, as we note above, debates about curricular change have overshadowed questions related to the strategies schools rely on to mentor their students in matters that fall outside of the formal curriculum. This is a notable oversight, given the strong emphasis placed on moral development in Japanese educational institutions.

To remedy this lack we collaborated in what might be described as an artificially constructed longitudinal ethnography, or a retrospective analysis of guidance practices. The institutions we studied were located in different geographical as well as temporal locations. Fukuzawa conducted fieldwork in three Tokyo middle schools between 1983 and 1986. Bjork studied three middle schools located in a rural area of northern Japan between 2005 and 2006. Both of us employed ethnographic methods, spending extended periods of time (between 3 and 9 months) at each research site. Acting as participant observers, we adhered to the criteria for ethnographic research identified by Massey and Walford (Massey & Walford, 1998; Walford, 2001). Inside the schools, we employed comprehensive selection strategies, interviewing teachers and administrators at each site and observing each homeroom on multiple occasions. We took part in the broad range of activities that encompass middle school life. Our goal was to develop an understanding of “naturally occurring human behavior in context” (Moore, 2010, p. 87).

We acknowledge the limitations of this research methodology. First, the schools scrutinized in the 1980s differed from those examined in the 2000s in a number of respects. The most notable of those discontinuities relates to geographical setting. These schools served communities that differed in terms of employment patterns, income, proximity to social and entertainment activities, family structure, and many other factors. Second, we collected data independently, before deciding to collaborate on this chapter. Our conclusions would have been more convincing if we had established the data collection tools together, before heading into the field. Given the timing of the project, however, that was not possible, though we did study each other’s field notes as we prepared this manuscript. Third, due to space constraints, we focus on conditions in two middle schools. We realize that events on those campuses do not represent standard practices in all of the schools we studied or in other parts of Japan, but they do lead us to important tentative conclusions.

Our objective was not to offer a set of findings that can be generalized to schools throughout Japan. Rather, we sought to take a close look at teachers’ views about student guidance at two distinct points in time, and to analyze how and why the techniques for mentoring their pupils have changed. We chose to highlight certain conditions and events in this essay because they reveal how changes in pupil attitudes toward school and society have complicated the lives of
teachers. As we will show, many contemporary educators are struggling to maintain order in the classroom while simultaneously conforming to the principles of relaxed education advocated by the MOE. The experiences of instructors at the two middle schools described in this chapter may be unique, but contrasts in their thinking about how to mentor adolescents underscore the extent of the changes that have shaken Japanese schools in the years between economic prosperity and the current, post-yutori reform era.

**MIDDLE SCHOOL CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT**

A number of studies of Japanese schooling have documented a basic core of organizational features and practices related to classroom management. Beginning with Lewis’s study of strategies for social control in kindergarten, researchers have identified guidance strategies that de-emphasize immediate compliance in favor of the nurturance of internal norms. Peak (1991) concluded that by minimizing the impression of teacher control, Japanese preschool teachers create a climate of cooperation. The major purpose of preschool was training children in specific routines and attitudes compatible with group life. Lewis (1995), Sato (1991), Tsuneyoshi (2001), and others have found parallel patterns in elementary schools. Fukuzawa and LeTendre (2001) and LeTendre (1994) document similar practices in middle schools.

These aspects of Japanese classroom culture are rooted in prewar classroom management routines (Sao, 1998). During the Taisho Period (1912–1926) classroom management incorporated the current form of autonomous classrooms in which students govern themselves through small groups. As part of a number of liberal education reforms, teachers developed a wide range of task-based small groups charged with cleaning, monitoring, news, and various subjects. These practices quickly diffused throughout the nation. Student guidance also has roots in the prewar juvenile policing and protection policies as well as wartime factory schools. Many of the carefully prescribed routines, dress codes, and surveillance techniques of lifestyle guidance were pioneered at this time (Ambaras, 2005).

Deeply rooted views about the inherent goodness of children also shape practices in contemporary Japanese schools. Especially in the early years of schooling, teachers “attempt to preserve and develop as much of the individual’s original nature as possible” (Yamamura, 1986, p. 36). But this conception of the self is balanced by another set of values tied to the benefits of hard work. Nurturing children through the challenges that confront them, it is believed, will help them develop positive dispositions and relations with others: unchecked indulgence can produce egocentric, undisciplined individuals. White (1987) notes that in Japan there is

"a notion that the child benefits from experiencing hardship. . . . Kurō (suffering or hardship) is believed to have a beneficial effect on the self, deepening it and maturing it, removing self-centeredness. Without kurō a person cannot be said to have grown up" (p. 29). As children progress through the education system, they are increasingly exposed to tasks designed to strengthen their character.

One mechanism for encouraging students to behave appropriately that has received a great deal of attention from foreign scholars has been the extensive rules (kōsoku) designed to control behavior in Japanese secondary schools. Teachers depend on rules to maintain middle schools functioning smoothly, and to gauge the mental state of their pupils. Failure to adhere to school rules is often interpreted as a sign of deeper psychological issues, conflict with peers, or problems in the home (Fukuzawa, 1994). Enforcement of kōsoku is treated as a shared responsibility for all members of a school community. Ideally, pupil monitoring of personal behavior and that of their classmates will obviate the need for adults to step in and discipline children who break rules. Such school-sanctioned peer pressure endows students with extensive power over their classmates, an important aspect of Japanese schooling.

In summary, middle school represents a key transition point in the life of Japanese citizens, bridging the worlds of childhood and adulthood. Educators create social structures that encourage pupils, individually and in cooperation with their peers, to manage their own behavior (LeTendre, 2000). To increase the likelihood that pupils will meet the gradually narrowing definitions of acceptable behavior, an “intensive program of social control” (Fukuzawa, 1994, p. 83) is implemented. The key components of this program are daily routines designed to create order in school life, extensive rules related to student appearance and behavior, and activities designed to involve students in school life. In the past, if the system failed to produce its desired outcomes, teachers would step in and address transgressions as they saw fit; potent displays of authority communicated to all members of the community the importance of adhering to established rules.

In the following sections we present two case studies, one from the 1980s that illustrates the general patterns introduced here and one from the 2000s that suggests shifts in the application of this basic pattern. In the 1980s, not all classroom management was uniform. Individual teachers varied in how much they relied on empathy or authority to gain the respect of students. However, the approaches of all instructors did converge toward a basic pattern from the early to the mid-1980s. Moreover, teachers in the schools we visited at that time expressed confidence in the correctness and effectiveness of their classroom management and disciplinary strategies. In contrast, teachers today often lack both confidence and agreed-upon strategies. Our comparison of the two case studies highlights these changes.
CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT IN THE 1980S

In this section, we focus on guidance practices observed during the 1980s at Kita Middle School, an institution located in central Tokyo. The first reason we chose to highlight this particular case study was that *seikatsu shidō* practices at Kita most closely approximated the ideal of “intimacy coupled with severity.” Members of the Kita faculty actively sought to involve students in daily activities and special events so as to reinforce their ties to the institution. These included activities designed to strengthen group cohesion and the extensive use of *han* (small groups of students) in classroom management. At the same time, disciplinary approaches at Kita were often severe: Physical punishment was common (until 1986), the number of school rules increased each year, and teachers enforced them vigorously.

The second reason we chose Kita was that the school’s aggressive implementation of student guidance created a sense of unity and order in the school. Kita teachers remarked that the school could easily slide into chaos without their constant vigilance and efforts; in fact, Kita had experienced discipline problems in previous years. Instructors described the neighborhood surrounding the school as lower-middle-class, with a large number of “problem” residents. In other words, teachers did not feel that they could depend on all parents to support school policies. In this way, the Kita district in Tokyo resembled the community of our rural middle school in northern Japan, where a significant portion of students also held low educational expectations for their future.

In the 1980s, teachers at Kita thoroughly monitored student behavior, both in class and outside of school. The faculty placed a high priority on developing strong emotional ties between teachers and students. According to one young teacher interviewed during that period, “The starting point of all education is the love of teachers for students. Out of love and consideration, a heart-to-heart or close relationship of mutual trust can grow. Mutual trust means a relationship in which two individuals become indivisible or inseparable.” Such intimacy was regarded as the basis for the empathetic, implicit side of discipline; the strength of students’ connections to teachers and their involvement in the school community would lead them to behavioral rules.

To monitor out-of-school behavior, Kita teachers used both standard “Daily Life Notebooks” (seikatsu tsuchō) and unstructured group diaries. The notebooks served as a place for students to write down assignments and lists of things to bring for the next day’s classes. More important, they provided teachers with information about students’ lifestyles and thoughts that might not be apparent during regular classroom activities. In a section of their notebooks labeled “record of daily life,” students described their feelings and daily activities. At a glance, instructors could gauge students’ attitudes toward school and their peers. In addition, to monitor afterschool life and personal feelings in more detail, homeroom teachers used unstructured group diaries, which they periodically collected to comment on.

Not only did Kita teachers closely scrutinize student behavior, but they also spent much time engineering an environment that systematically increased student/teacher interactions. According to the head of guidance,

The school must make places for each and every student to play an active part. Thus we have developed special events and encourage participation in extracurricular activities, have teachers’ aides, and promote an active student council and committees. When I came here, Kita had problems. We began to increase the number of special events and make those that existed into occasions for all students to participate. . . . We are always looking for more and better ways to involve students in school.

Although they invested extensive time and energy strengthening the emotional bonds that connected them to their students, teachers also recognized the benefits of maintaining a sense of discipline on campus. “At school, rules are like the constitution. Every group has rules, and students must learn the importance of rules in human society,” observed one middle-aged teacher.

The use of physical punishment, or *taibatsu*, often lent a Spartan air to disciplinary procedures. In actuality, “physical punishment” at Kita rarely involved teachers striking students. More frequently, punishment meant sitting *seiza* (a formal position with legs folded underneath the thighs), often on a hard linoleum or wood floor in an unheated hallway or gym. On any given day, several students could be observed sitting *seiza* in the halls outside classrooms or the teachers’ room. Kita teachers meted out this punishment for a number of chronic, but minor offenses, including talking in class or assembly, forgetting to bring books to class, bringing unnecessary items to school, running in the halls, and tardiness.

Teachers also used a bamboo rod (shinai) to discipline students, though infrequently. Only after repeated verbal reprimands and/or *seiza* had been tried with no apparent effect did teachers resort to using the long bamboo rods. An incident in a music class observed by Fukuzawa illustrates this approach. During a music rehearsal, students were particularly talkative and unfocused as they learned a song for the upcoming cultural festival. After warning a rambunctious male student to be quiet three times, the music teacher called him out of the class and whacked him on his buttocks three times. The teacher later explained that when all else fails, only physical punishment can bring students into line.

At Kita, physical punishment was coupled with extensive monitoring of student behavior in and out of school. Teachers regularly scrutinized students’ appearance and the items they brought to school. Regulations concerning appearance
comprised a major category of rules; the types of extra shoes, bags, and accessories students were allowed as well as hair length and shape, pant cuff width, and skirt length were all specified in detail. No nonacademic reading material, mirrors, jewelry, toys, or grooming equipment were allowed in school. Kita teachers vigilantly searched for such items (collectively labeled fuyôbutsu, or unnecessary items) by looking into students’ desks and bags. They usually found quite a bit of “contraband,” which they confiscated then returned to students after school, with a warning not to bring it again. At one faculty meeting, the first-year teachers even discussed restricting the number of colored pens and pencils students could bring to school in order to discourage drawing during classes.

As the following incident captured in Fukuzawa’s field notes illustrates, teachers viewed violations of rules related to appearance and unnecessary items as indicators of serious problems:

The sounds of Mrs. Iwasa, a P.E. teacher, yelling at a student outside in the cold hall in front of the teachers’ room, can easily be heard from inside the warm teachers’ room.

“Why don’t you work hard, huh? It’s your irresponsible attitude, that’s the problem. You’re the one who is at fault. You have a twisted mind and I’m going to straighten it out for you. Look at me. What’s wrong with you?”
(Inaudible response)

“You know why I have to discipline you. This is a big problem, bringing other things to school. Are you working part-time?”
(Inaudible response)

“You lie so much, how do I know you’re telling the truth now? Huh? If you think you can fool me, you’re mistaken.”

Mrs. Iwasa strides into the room and takes some paper out of her desk, then returns to the hallway. She gives the student, who is sitting seiza on the hall floor, the paper to write a reflection essay (hanseibun) about her transgression. When she returns to the teachers’ room, Mrs. Iwasa explains that another teacher thought he noticed that the girl had faintly colored lips. A tinted lip gloss was found in her bag and the girl admitted to using it. “All lip gloss nowadays contains color,” Mrs. Iwasa explained. “It’s like wearing lipstick.”

Teachers at Kita usually dealt with dress code violations and other precocious behavior in a similar manner. They were particularly concerned about girls who wore lipstick and other kinds of makeup to school. Akin to dyed hair or permanents, makeup signaled to teachers a student’s inappropriate concern with physical appearance and the opposite sex.

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For teachers during the 1980s, it was the combination of strictly enforced rules within close relationships that was effective. A web of activities nurtured student attachment to school and commitment to following school rules. When that type of “positive reinforcement” proved ineffective, teachers employed more direct and forceful means of eliciting student compliance. Verbal harangues, assignments of reflection essays, and meetings with parents were all standard practices. Rohlen’s phrase, “intimacy coupled with severity,” truly captures the style of student guidance found at Kita as well as the basic patterns at other middle schools we observed in the 1980s.

SHIFTING STUDENTS, PRACTICE, AND BEHAVIORS

The rules and rituals that organize life in Japanese middle schools have proven remarkably stable: Teachers continue to rely on traditional greetings to mark the beginnings and endings of lessons; all members of the community are still expected to participate in daily school cleaning activities (sôji); the focus and structure of special assemblies held each year have been altered only slightly, if at all; and students are still expected to adjust their language to convey their respect for individuals older than themselves. Anyone who has been educated in or spent extensive time in Japanese schools is familiar with these activities. Their continued prevalence suggests a dependable regularity to the rhythm of school life.

The durability of such routines, however, conceals underlying shifts in the relationships between teachers and pupils, and in the dynamics of student guidance practices. The rituals that organize daily life in middle schools may not have changed significantly, but their implementation has. Adults continue to depend on tried-and-true strategies to manage the behavior of adolescents, but not all middle school students are choosing to follow the “scripts” (LeTendre, 2000, p. 95) that have been delivered to them. Many are engaging in revisions and improvisation rarely displayed by their predecessors. With increasing frequency, the carefully choreographed exchanges between school actors are culminating in unpredictable endings.

One factor that led to this shift was heightened concern about the methods used to control students. In the 1990s, responding to criticism that middle schools were excessively rigid and pressure-filled sites for learning, the MOE encouraged teachers to exhibit more empathy toward their students. In May 1994, the Ministry issued a directive that spelled out implications of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child for schools (MEXT, 1994). Using the rhetoric of international human rights, the Ministry emphasized the need to ban the use of any form of physical punishment in schools. The shift toward more compassionate approaches to student guidance was regarded as one way of reducing bullying and in-school violence.
This attention to the affective aspects of learning meshed with the curricular revisions that formed the core of the relaxed education reform movement. Regulations related to hair length were not eliminated, but responding to transgressions with harsh remedies was discouraged. As the incident from Bjork's field notes below illustrates, the revised student guidance practices often created spaces for students to assert their individuality and to challenge institutional norms.

During the first month of the 2005–2006 school year at Hama Middle School, an institution located in a small city in northern Japan, approximately 75 third-year students struggle in and spread across the gym. All of the students are wearing warm-up suits, but most of the outfits have been altered. Several girls have cut lines in their pants, starting at the ankle and continuing up to the knee, creating flaps that hang like curtains in a window; others have removed the elastic cuffs from their sleeves. It is rare to spot a boy whose pants or shorts reach his hips. The current fad is for boys to pull their pants down to their thighs, just covering the bottom hem of their shirts. All of the young men don the requisite sweatpants, but several are not wearing the matching jacket.

Mr. Hori stands in front and informs the group that today they will practice bowing and saying “onegai shimasu” (a greeting, loosely translated as “Please teach us,” that students typically recite in unison to begin all formal lessons). After demonstrating the proper bowing technique, he divides the class into groups of four and tells them to rehearse the action he just modeled. At this point Mrs. Sakamoto, another P.E. teacher who has been observing from the opposite side of the gym, joins Mr. Hori in inspecting students as they practice bowing. Mrs. Sakamoto tells one girl to hold her buttocks together more tightly as she bows. Both instructors pay close attention to the angle of students' backs as they bend forward. The adults are assisted by a student who moves through the gym and reads a set of directions printed on a piece of paper she carries in her right hand. At first glance, this person seems like an unusual choice to hold this position: Her lower lip is pierced by a large silver ball and a swath of pink hair punctuates her black bangs. But the girl carries out her role dutifully, displaying none of the rebelliousness hinted at by her appearance.

During these inspections, most of the participants listen carefully to the suggestions shared by their teachers, and modify their performances accordingly. But as soon as a teacher moves on to another group, students tend to lose interest in the bowing exercise. One group of boys moves to a basketball hoop and takes turns trying to jump up and touch the rim; the members of another han initiate a shadow boxing match; a combination of boys and girls run across the floor and slide on their knees, seeing who can propel themselves the farthest.

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The teachers continue to conduct the inspections, but begin to look frustrated by the antics occurring around them. Thirty minutes into the period, Mr. Hori announces that the independent practice time has ended. He calls a group composed of two boys and two girls to the front of the gym and tells them to perform the ritual for the rest of the class. One of the boys yells out a command and the group forms a straight line,bows, and calls out “onegai shimasu” in unison. After a short pause, everyone turns to the right, creates a new line, and crisply repeats the set of steps. The audience applauds.

Mr. Hori calls a second group, all boys, to the front of the gym. This foursome is not nearly as impressive as the first. It follows the correct procedure, but with little enthusiasm. When the group finishes, Mr. Hori announces that their posture was poor, and makes them repeat the act. The second performance does not look noticeably better than the first, but Mr. Hori offers no additional criticism, and allows the students to return to their spots on the floor. The next group, all girls, is even sloppier. Two of the performers giggle throughout, and the other two make no attempt to bow. Mr. Hori, looking increasingly irritated, releases the four girls. The members of the audience who are chatting among themselves now outnumber those who are paying attention.

When only 5 minutes of the period remain, Mr. Hori returns to the front of the room and calls the class to attention. He instructs everyone to check if the person sitting next to them is sitting straight. Upon hearing this, most of the third-year students sit up; a few do not respond. Mrs. Sakamoto walks over to four girls who are lying on the floor and tells them to pull their legs up against their chests. Two of the girls follow this direction; the other two ignore it.

Mr. Hori informs the students that he thinks they did a really good job and thanks them for their effort. After pausing briefly, he adds, “But you can do better. I would give you a score of 20 out of 100.” He then demonstrates improvements they could make, such as holding their hands straight at their sides when they bow. Mr. Hori informs the group that it will continue to practice bowing and stretching the next time they meet.

UNDERSTANDING GUIDANCE PRACTICES

This third-year P.E. lesson captures the tensions that middle school teachers are experiencing as they attempt to adapt to changes in both their students and the approaches to guidance employed in their schools. Following a secondary school model commonly used for decades, Mr. Hori and Mrs. Sakamoto sought
to establish a dependable routine that would create order in their class and instill in students a sense of seriousness that they would display throughout the year. As LeTendre (2000) has observed, Japanese teachers tend to believe that, “given proper routines, young adolescents [can] control their behavior and organize themselves quite effectively in groups” (p. 119). Yet the power of such routines has always depended on a delicate balance of clearly communicated behavioral expectations, student obedience, an established system of peer monitoring, and the presence of teachers willing to assert their authority when necessary.

In the physical education class, however, students appeared to realize that misbehavior would not generate any serious consequences. The most obvious sign of nonconformity was communicated visually. In the past, students who did not conform to a school’s dress code or rules on appearance could face serious disciplinary consequences, as the incident from Fukuzawa’s field notes illustrates. In the contemporary setting, however, teachers are prohibited from applying the severe punishments commonly administered at Kita in the 1980s.

Commitment to controlling unnecessary items has also waned in the succeeding years. This was true at all of the middle schools we visited in the years since the introduction of yutori kyōiku policies. Although the rules governing student presentation and possessions remained in place, they were rarely enforced with vigor. Not only did Hama pupils come to class without some of the standard pieces of the physical education uniform, but many of them went to great lengths to alter the items that they did wear. Yet neither Mr. Hori nor Mrs. Sakamoto commented on such infractions. They did not reprimand students with long or dyed hair, makeup, or pierced body parts.

Also notable was the lackadaisical attitude displayed by many individuals. Several of the third-year students did take this activity seriously, and capitalized on the opportunity to hone their bowling skills. Pupils who invested minimal effort in the activity, however, outnumbered those more serious students. Some participants followed their teachers’ directions at a surface level, but socialized with their friends when not being observed by a teacher. Others made no attempt to disguise their lack of interest in the proceedings. Even when asked to perform before their peers, several individuals continued to display an attitude of defiance. Through silence, refusal to follow directions, and verbal comments, they expressed a critique of the lesson.

The two teachers, both veteran educators who were well liked by students, appeared unsure about how to respond to the student resistance. It is quite possible that in a pre-yutori environment, the instructors would not have tolerated such displays of disrespect; students who refused to follow instructions would have been sternly reprimanded. But Mr. Hori and Mrs. Sakamoto avoided exercising their authority in a heavy-handed manner, a response that contrasted sharply with the actions taken at Kita a generation earlier. At Hama, the instructors did not raise their voices or punish individuals who did not take the activity seriously. Instead, they encouraged and cajoled misbehaving pupils, to little effect. The difficulties they experienced during this lesson are illustrative of the challenges faced by contemporary educators, regardless of their subject area specialty. The teachers we observed and interviewed understood the rationale driving the shift to more student-friendly approaches to mentoring adolescents, but few at Hama Middle School had figured out how to follow such advice while maintaining order in their classrooms.

SOCIAL REINFORCEMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

The balance of nurturance and punishment traditionally found in Japanese schools appears to have been recalibrated. Rather than admonish or discipline pupils who cross the line of acceptable behavior, educators like Mr. Hori gently encourage students to follow school rules and procedures, presenting themselves as allies rather than authority figures. Of course, there is great variety in the personas displayed by educators. Many veteran teachers we observed created classroom environments that were highly ordered and formal. But even the most assertive instructors were careful not to use disciplinary tactics that could be construed as harsh or abusive.

A 2011 revisit to one of our 1980 research schools in Tokyo evidenced similar soft, counseling-based disciplinary approaches. When minor dress code violations occurred, homeroom teachers talked to the offender. If the problem persisted, the parents were called in for a meeting. If that failed, the principal himself talked to the student individually. According to the principal,

The most important way to change students is to let them know how important they are, to cherish them. I try to get them to see how important they are as well as how important others are. The point of discipline is for them to live happily with others. Wearing clothes that offend other people (e.g., falling down pants, overly short skirts) shows lack of consideration for others. . . . Dressing neatly preserves social cohesion. If I can convey this and my sense of respect for them as individual human beings to them, they change.

Teachers at this school now deal with forgotten and forbidden items, tardiness, and other minor issues with individual checklists. For students who habitually forget to bring the things they need, teachers call the parents. If the problem
continues, they refer the student to the school counselor, a position introduced in the early 1990s. The rationale for this approach is that “students who constantly forget things and whose families are unable to do anything about the problem usually have deeper psychological problems that we teachers cannot handle,” explained the principal.

This trend toward more psychological and individualized approaches to student guidance meshes with the great value attached to maintaining harmony at the interpersonal level in Japanese society (Krauss, Rohl, & Steinhoff, 1984). The teachers we observed went to great lengths to avoid conflict with students. On a daily basis, they attempted to diffuse potential clashes. Consistent with the framing of the middle school as a site of transition from childhood to adulthood, instructors emphasized to pupils that they ultimately needed to take responsibility for their own actions. This message does not represent a departure from the ideas that have traditionally anchored student guidance in Japanese middle schools, but in the contemporary setting students have greater freedom to apply that advice as they see fit. The balance of “intimacy” and “severity” has been disrupted.

Teachers continue to seek to strengthen their bonds with students through activities such as Daily Life Notebooks. As was true at Kita, members of the Hama faculty depended on small groups of students to support and monitor each other. For example, following a long-established tradition, daily homeroom meetings at Hama included hansei kai (meetings that focus on self-reflection). During these group discussions, which were led by students, members of the class were encouraged to reflect on positive accomplishments as well as things they could be doing better. In theory, such collective brainstorming would lessen the pressure placed on teachers to act as authority figures. The Hama faculty also organized a number of special activities designed to build class cohesion. The members of each grade level, for instance, participated in an annual overnight excursion. Students worked in groups to plan all aspects of the trips, including scheduling, budgets, and meals. Adults explained that these activities—daily rituals as well as the special events—were designed to make students feel more connected to their classmates and to the school. In practice, however, these strategies did not always produce their intended results. In most 2nd- and 3rd-grade classrooms, a handful of individuals chose not to participate in, or disrupted, the proceedings.

Relaxed enforcement of school rules has enhanced the autonomy experienced by students, who in the past were required to adhere to school rules, or face serious consequences. They realize that rules about acceptable behavior and dress are not consistently enforced. Capitalizing on the mismatch between official school policies and their implementation on campus, adolescents are questioning, criticizing, and resisting behavioral directives with increasing boldness. Many treat school rituals designed to serve an integrative function as “empty formalities”

(Geertz, 1960) that have little connection to their immediate needs. Teachers may feel compelled to avoid conflict whenever possible, but students do not necessarily place a high priority on preserving group harmony.

Middle school pupils have learned that ignoring school rules about dress is not likely to provoke the harsh reprisals that were common in the past. In the schools we visited in northern Japan, second- and third-year students unapologetically adjusted their body and possessions to assert their individuality. Boys as well as girls grew their hair longer than was officially permitted; they also dyed it a variety of shades. Boys’ sideburns sometimes extended below their cheeks. Girls wore makeup and jewelry that often was quite flashy. Individuals of both genders pierced their ears, lips, and eyebrows. Students shortened the hems of their uniforms, removed the cuffs, added additional layers, and left pieces (such as neckties) at home. They also modified accessories and physical spaces to fit their personalities. Backpacks were frequently covered with stickers, ornaments, and decorative patches. Some students invested a great deal of energy in decorating their desks, placing objects (tape dispensers, stuffed animals, plastic and metal figurines) on top of their desks to create a sort of portable personal office space.

To someone educated in other school systems, these examples of resistance may not seem noteworthy. Teachers in other parts of the world face challenges to authority far more serious than dyed hair or graffiti-covered desks. In the Japanese context, however, acceptance of these acts represents a sharp detour from previous practice. The tendency to accommodate rather than reprimand individuals who do not follow school rules reduces the risks associated with misbehaving in class. This ambiguity creates opportunities for students to augment their autonomy and power.

Of course, not all adolescents take advantage of opportunities to challenge school authority. Factors such as an individual’s socioeconomic status, ethnicity, linguistic abilities, and family background can shape his/her attitudes toward educational institutions and authority figures (Banks, 2007; Lee, Murphy-Shigematsu, & Befu, 2006; Ogbu, 2008). In a comparative study of children’s performance in school, D’Amato (1993) observes that structural as well as situational rationales shape a child’s orientation toward school. Students who find structural reasons for investing in their education, such as links between academic achievement and future educational and occupational opportunities, “tend to construct their peer cultures around the politics of school, organizing themselves in terms of teacher standards and teacher indications of relative peer standing” (D’Amato, 1993, p. 192). Pupils may also find intrinsic value in the schooling process. D’Amato (1993) concludes that youngsters who are not motivated by either of these forces often “appear free to confront the premises and politics of schools openly and directly” (p. 197). Children who face socioeconomic or academic challenges are especially likely to display such resistance.
Students as well as teachers come to school with distinct attitudes toward each other and the purpose of education, motivations for investing in their work, and opinions about what constitutes appropriate behavior at school. As one would expect, pupils with a record of academic success tended to accept the authority of the school and to comply with school rules—in the 1980s as well as today. Children who struggle academically, in contrast, have begun to rebel against structures that do not serve their own interests. School rules that previously deterred even adolescents who earn low marks in school do not exert the same power to shape behavior that they did 30 years ago. The paucity of meaningful short- as well as long-term penalties for insubordination has expanded the autonomy enjoyed by pupils. Instructors can no longer depend on their pupils to compliantly adhere to the expectations of adults.

Teachers are also modifying their actions to fit contemporary realities in schools. Many veteran educators are attempting to reconcile their experiences with student guidance prior to adoption of the relaxed education policies with current conditions in schools. Challenged to mentor children whose needs they often find have grown more extensive over time, and constrained by limits to the practices deemed acceptable by the MOE, they question their ability to instill in students the values and attitudes necessary to succeed in contemporary society.

We do not mean to suggest that middle school classrooms are the anarchic sites of youth rebellion that media reports on classroom collapse (gakkyū hōkai) sometimes suggest. Nor did we witness any secondary teachers who completely lost control of a group of pupils. In most classrooms we observed, the majority of students sat quietly at their desks and performed the assigned tasks. For a variety of reasons, the absence of negative consequences for misbehavior did not tempt such students to challenge teachers. Those with promising academic futures tended to focus on lessons regardless of the instructor’s class management skills. With a track record of academic success, they appeared eager to protect their reputation as good students. Another carrot that good students chased was the possibility of receiving a recommendation (suisen) to a high school from the faculty based on grades. Third-year students who were awarded recommendations were not required to take written high school entrance examinations.

**CONCLUSION**

The changes between Tokyo in the 1980s and schools in northern Japan after 2000 are truly striking. Teachers currently feel challenged by a combination of more extensive pupil needs and inconsistent support for education in the home. Of course, Japanese classrooms have always included students who tested the authority of teachers and institutions. Instructors we studied in the 1980s also voiced their frustration with unruly members of their classes. However, the consensus among the educators we interviewed in the 2000s was that adolescents today lead more complicated lives than their predecessors, which has expanded the range and intensity of the demands placed on schools. Demographic data as well as qualitative research supports this view (Bjork, 2009; Gordon, 2005; Kariya, 2010). The following comment by a middle school teacher underscores the disequilibrium that perceived changes among adolescents have created for instructors:

Every day at this school I ask myself, “Is there some common reason students should be like this?” There are established ideas about what students should be like and what they should do. Since I came here, many of those preconceptions have been broken. For example, my fixed ideas have become very unstable. In education, there should be some fixed things and some things we should try based on students’ needs. That border is shifting.

Feelings of frustration, confusion, anger, self-doubt, and disappointment pervaded the comments of interviewees as they reflected on their work. For most, the classroom was a different place from what it had been when they began their careers, and responding to new conditions presented a seemingly unending set of trials for them.

Over a long period of time, teachers used a stable set of familiar yet flexible practices to mentor pupils that had roots in prewar traditions of juvenile protection and classroom management. The various threads of those traditions were woven together to form systematic classroom management practices that spread throughout schools nationwide, homogenizing approaches to seikatsu shidō by the mid-1980s. Observers often found fault with some of those practices, especially those that involved physical punishment, but they did enhance instructors’ ability to maintain order in their classrooms.

Over the last 20 years, the programmatic guidance approaches of the 1980s have steadily eroded. The Ministry of Education has prohibited teachers from using the “strict” tactics common in the 1980s—without supplying them with a new set of practices. As Okano (2008) suggests, the Ministry seems unwilling to push one vision of school management on schools, but “leaves room for a wide range of interpretations and further negotiations among the different lower level parties, by for example, framing the policies in vague language open for diverse interpretation” (p. 252).

The teachers we interviewed in northern Japan had received a barrage of information about what not to do, but thirsted for more tangible advice about how to engage and mentor students who resisted their authority. Many found that broad
proclamations about the need to adopt more “friendly” approaches to student guidance were difficult to translate into concrete action. The absence of a detailed set of procedures designed for use in a relaxed school environment left many instructors feeling unmoored; they approached student guidance with trepidation, often in isolation. Lacking specific policy guidelines or models introduced in conjunction with yutori kyōiku, teachers tended to use pieces of the student guidance system that were effective in previous decades, such as Daily Life Notebooks. However, in many cases, partial implementation of what had been considered an effective web of practices no longer produced the expected outcomes. In those situations, the options available to teachers who were no longer permitted to resort to actions that might be considered “physical punishment” were inadequate. Cognizant of the limits to adult authority, less constrained by pressure to accede to the power of the group, and not concerned about the consequences of resisting authority, disaffected adolescents “reengineered the environment” to fit their immediate personal needs. In this context, the comprehensive guidance approaches of the 1980s seem to have fallen apart.

NOTES

1. We also conducted follow-up visits to our research sites after the primary period of data collection had ended. Fukuzawa made multiple follow-up visits as an assistant language teacher from 1987 to 1989 and again in 2011 for follow-up interviews. Bjork returned to the schools in his sample in 2009 to conduct additional interviews with key informants.

2. We thank Mark Langager for pointing out the significance of this directive and sharing with us his experiences of its impact on middle school guidance while he was working in schools in the Tokyo area at this time.

3. At this school, two homeroom classes were usually combined for P.E. lessons. This is why the number of students participating in this activity is so large with two teachers present.

REFERENCES


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

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