CHAPTER 11

Education after the “Lost Decade(s)”

Stability or Stagnation?

Stories of change generally attract more attention than narratives of continuity. But as Baker Street’s fictional detective once said, sometimes the remarkable event is what did not happen. Over the last twenty-five years, there have been significant attempts to change Japanese education, as might have been expected, given the new challenges that have arisen during that time; yet these have had limited success. This chapter examines how far new departures and challenges have affected schools and considers what the state of education can tell us about the state of Japan. At the elementary and junior high levels, I focus especially on three movements during the late 1990s and 2000s: the attempt to encourage more autonomous and creative learning; the subsequent reemphasis of conventional academic attainment; and the promotion of small class sizes and differentiated learning. Ironically, these movements have left Japanese compulsory education not so very far from its starting point in the early 1990s. This raises the question of why relatively little change has occurred. Does this represent stability or stagnation? Is it a sign of a sensible approach to change and a willingness to recognize the strengths of existing structures and practices, contrasting with the sometimes frenetic whirlwinds of initiative and counter-initiative that have often left teachers elsewhere in the
world bewildered and cynical? Or does it signify uncertainty, indecision, and paralysis, a disabling inability to respond to new needs and circumstances? I will first give an ethnographic view of the different stages of school education in contemporary Japan before examining this larger question.

**Elementary Education**

Japan’s elementary and junior high schools have been subjected to conflicting movements over the last two decades. During the 1990s and early 2000s, policymakers focused on two goals: encouraging more autonomous learning and creativity while promoting children’s healthy development through engagement with the social and natural worlds around them (Cave 2007, 16–19, 195–196). In 2002, this culminated in the move to a five-day school week, the slimming down of hours for traditional academic subjects, and the introduction of a major new program at the elementary and junior high levels, Integrated Studies (Sōgō-Teki na Gakushū), intended to achieve both the above goals through exploratory learning. Yet even before 2002, there were attacks on the new curriculum, both from conservatives worried about slipping academic standards and from progressives concerned that a focus on exploration would favor middle-class children and widen inequality (Cave 2007, 19–21).

In response, the government promoted smaller class sizes and learning differentiated according to proficiency. Both of these initiatives were innovative, in a system with a maximum class size of forty at the elementary and junior high levels and long-standing aversion to differential treatment of children. Deepening public and media concern about falling academic standards during the 2000s led to schools increasingly refocusing on “basic academic attainment” as the decade progressed, culminating in a new curriculum revision that once again increased hours for academic subjects from 2011–2012. Here, I illustrate the effects at three elementary schools in Sakura, a city of one hundred thousand people in the Kansai region of Japan, visited in 2008 and 2010.

It is 8.30 a.m. at Shinmachi Elementary School on a late September morning in 2008, and teachers are making their way to the classrooms. Each elementary class has its own teacher, who teaches almost all subjects to the children—nationally, 63 percent of elementary teachers are women and 37 percent men (Monbukagakushō 2011a). Once the teacher has arrived, the two monitors for that day call the class to order and start the morning meeting. Monitor duty rotates daily around the class, so every child must take on this task—one aspect of a set of responsibilities that children learn to fulfill. Each
child is a member of multiple small groups within the class, and responsibilities for different activities are rotated around the groups, so that all take their turn. Primary duties are serving lunch and cleaning the school daily. At lunch time, the members of the responsible group don aprons, caps, and masks for hygiene purposes; wheel the pans of food to their classroom on a trolley; and then serve it to their classmates. Later in the day, all children spend twenty minutes cleaning the school, from classrooms to corridors and toilets, using brooms, dustpans, and floorcloths. They thus learn to take responsibility for their own environment; there are no cleaning staff for these duties.

Most children will already have experienced small groups and some rotating responsibilities at preschool, attended by 95 percent of Japanese children, most commonly from ages three to six (Cave 2011a, 247–250; Lewis 1989). Japanese preschool teachers resemble elementary school teachers in preferring a low authority profile that lets children learn to work out their own differences. These approaches are strongly influenced by memories of children’s lives in Japan up to the 1960s or so, before affluence, motor cars, and computers, when children tended to learn social skills by playing outside for hours in neighborhood groups, largely unsupervised by adults (Tobin, Hsueh, and Karasawa 2009, 154–156). This nostalgia for aspects of the past is expressed by Shinmachi’s principal, who tells me that the human heart (kokoro) has worsened more than anything else in Japan, as seen in poor manners and failure to keep rules; moreover, he says, children lose their motivation when life is easy (raku), as he thinks it is today. Such concerns, fueled in the late 1990s by moral panics about heinous crimes, classroom indiscipline, and sexually open school girls, resulted in turn-of-the-century emphasis by government and schools on “education of the heart” (kokoro no kyōiku) (Higashi 2008), a movement that has led to stress on the social and emotional development aspects of Integrated Studies, as we shall see.

The elementary curriculum includes Japanese, mathematics, physical education, music, and arts and crafts through all grades. Social studies and science start from third grade and home economics from fifth grade. In the first two years of school, children take a subject called “Life Studies,” in which they learn about various aspects of the world around them. Children take Integrated Studies from third grade, and in today’s lesson at Shinmachi, the fifth graders are reflecting on the rice harvesting they did the week before. They talk about how tiring it was, how it made them think about how people used to live, how much the rice had grown in a short time, and various physical features of the rice plant. The teacher is particularly keen to reinforce what
the students say about how hard it is to grow and harvest rice and how they need to be thankful to the farmers— in other words, the moral lessons the children learn from their experience. The next day, the children brainstorm things about rice that they would like to research in more depth. The two lessons show teachers using Integrated Studies both to encourage students’ inquiry learning, which was its original curricular purpose, and also to have children think about the moral and social implications of their experiences. The new program is thus being used not only for innovative purposes, to encourage individuality and creative thought, but also to have children reflect on the demands of life and what they owe to others—a more long-standing educational aim, brought into renewed prominence by stress on “education of the heart.”

Senior teacher Mr. Sanada tells me that the Shinmachi school survey shows that the children are unenthusiastic about Integrated Studies, unlike children at Satoyama, his previous school in Sakura. The difference, he thinks, lies in the contrasting environments of the two schools. Shinmachi is a large school in a fast-developing but nondescript suburb, whose local environment offers no obvious focus for Integrated Studies projects. Satoyama is a small school in a traditional semi-rural district of the city, where children can study the local lifestyle of small-scale arable farming and cultivation of the mountain foothills. For Shinmachi, Mr. Sanada says, it will be good to have less Integrated Studies and more academic teaching from 2011, not least because the latter matches the demand for basic academic attainment at the local public junior high school, to which almost all Shinmachi children progress. In 2008, the educational trend is very much to emphasize conventional subjects rather than the interdisciplinarity of Integrated Studies, he observes.

Shinmachi also provides a good example of how elementary schools implement small-group teaching (usually in mathematics). Small-group teaching and proficiency-related learning have been promoted by the Ministry of Education and Science since 2001, but Shinmachi’s teachers use them selectively, in some textbook units and for some classes. For the unit I observe, two classes have been divided into smaller groups of fifteen students each (ignoring individual proficiency). However, the third class is not divided, so that all children can benefit from listening to the ideas of the few in the class who are good at mathematics. This peer learning (oshieai) in a larger group is felt to be more valuable than extra teacher attention in a smaller group, an attitude consistent with observations in the 1990s (Cave 2007, 145–146). On the other hand, teachers are ready to teach some units in smaller groups differentiated by proficiency if this is effective; units focused on number topics such as
fractions and decimals are thought suited to this approach. Teachers continue to believe strongly in the value of a strong class group that enables children of different proficiencies to learn from one another (Cave 2007, 100, 145–146), and their attitudes to differentiated learning are cautious though pragmatic. According to the teacher of the third class, Ms. Hara, many students in the class showed not only low mathematical proficiency but also little confidence overall; she implied that this was sometimes linked to difficult family situations, in an area of the city experiencing rapid growth, as many families move in from elsewhere in Japan.

We now fast forward two years to September 2010 at two more of Sakura’s elementary schools, Aoba and Shukuba. The lessons observed here vividly illustrate how teachers are seeking to respond to demands for solid academic attainment alongside moral and social awareness and investigative ability. First comes a sixth-grade Japanese class at Aoba, a school opened about a decade earlier to serve a large private housing development. Female teacher Ms. Izumi starts by showing the children a series of Chinese character (kanji) flashcards, in response to each of which the whole class chants the reading together. She next has the class read a famous passage from Confucius’ Analects, aloud three times in unison from a handout and twice more reading from a wide-screen television. After this, Ms. Izumi introduces two new Chinese characters; she shows the children how to write them on the blackboard and has them write the characters in the air with their fingers, counting the strokes as they do so aloud in unison; then they read the compounds that use the characters listed in their book aloud in unison; then they write the characters several times in their books and go to Ms. Izumi’s desk to have their books checked. All this is conducted at a good pace in just twelve minutes. During the rest of the lesson, the class starts a new textbook unit entitled The Town Where We All Live Together (Minna de ikiru machi). Ms. Izumi gets the children to think about the grammar of the title, and they then read the first page of the text and underline what they consider the key phrases; the children’s most popular choice is “each of us has the duty [gimu] to do what we can.” Ms. Izumi tells the children that living together in a town is not just about getting but also about paying and that in the following lessons, they will think about how to make their town a better place and put forward two proposals to the Sakura Children’s Council (Kodomo Gikai). Moral and social development is thus incorporated into Japanese language lessons, as well as into Integrated Studies.

Later, senior teacher Ms. Yoshioka tells me that Ms. Izumi emphasizes the basics and that her teaching style is rather different from that of many Sakura
teachers, as she has recently moved to the city from Osaka. Ms. Yoshioka comments that the current trend is to use the textbook more than she herself used to in the 1990s, when I observed her lessons at Nakamachi Elementary School (Cave 2007). While acknowledging the importance of basic attainment, she suggests that it is also important to develop children’s abilities to apply what they learn, gently implying a potential tension between the two demands. Nonetheless, thinking for oneself is not off the agenda; later, Ms. Izumi tells me how her class staged debates, like those I had witnessed at Nakamachi in the mid-1990s (Cave 2007, 104–106).

Three days later, I visit Shukuba, a small elementary school in a rural corner of Sakura. I observe a fifth-grade Japanese class on the unit “People’s Relationships with Things” (Hito to mono to no tsukiaikata), which is about recycling. It is a very different lesson to the one at Aoba; the children spend most of it scattered among the classroom, the library, and the computer room, doing investigative learning in preparation for writing. Later, the female teacher tells me that the current textbooks for Japanese contain many more investigative learning exercises than those she used as an elementary student in the late 1980s. However, such exercises are somewhat curtailed in the new textbooks recently published for use from 2011. Instead, these books feature short readings from famous works of classical literature, such as the Pillow Book and the Tale of the Heike. Mr. Sanada, who is now vice-principal at Shukuba, suggests that this is linked to a recent fashion for having children learn to recite poems and other short passages by heart, an exercise that is supposed to be good for the brain—helping to explain the rationale behind the recital of the Analects at Aoba. (Table 11.1 summarizes information about the elementary and junior high schools discussed.)

The variety of learning activities in these lessons from 2008 and 2010 shows how elementary schools are responding to resurgent demands that children have a firm grasp of academic basics, a strong moral sense, and a firm grounding in the local community. Integrated Studies has been used for social and moral education as well as to encourage self-motivated exploratory learning. Yet schools have not abandoned the promotion of investigation and thinking for oneself, the major concerns of the 1990s and early 2000s. Exactly what approaches are used at a particular school depends on teachers’ assessments of the most suitable response to local children’s needs, though there is a significant degree of commonality among schools in a locality because of the regular transfer of teachers. Thus, within Sakura, small schools in more stable, traditional, and rural communities, such as Satoyama and Shukuba,
have tended to place greater emphasis on investigative learning, while a school like Shinmachi, in a rapidly growing suburb with significant social strains, has focused more on securing children’s basic academic attainment. Such commonalities and variations are also illustrated by the research of Shimizu Kōkichi and his team on effective elementary schools in areas of social disadvantage. Shimizu points to the variety of strategies used, describing Fukuoka and Osaka schools that employ small-group and differentiated learning and Osaka schools that emphasize the creation of a strong school and classroom community, learning from peers in class, and strengthening children’s sense of togetherness and achievement through class singing and “human pyramids” at sports day (Shimizu 2004; 2008, 31–72). He argues that these features are particularly characteristic of Kansai schools (Shimizu 2004, 232–233)—and they can also be seen in the more middle-class Kansai environment of Sakura (see above and Cave 2007)—though Nancy Sato (2004, 17, 89, 97) documents class singing and “human pyramids” in a working-class school in Tokyo, suggesting

### Table 11.1

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shinmachi</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Large suburban school of roughly 750 students, in a district with relatively high numbers of families who have moved in from elsewhere in the prefecture or other parts of Japan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aoba</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Medium-sized suburban school of roughly 550 students, opened about 2000 to serve a private housing estate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shukuba</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Small rural school of roughly 200 students, in a district with many long-established families.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yoneda</td>
<td>Junior high</td>
<td>Medium-sized rural school of roughly 400 students, in a district with many long-established families.</td>
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how widely such strategies are diffused. Yet there is not homogeneity; Shimizu (2004) shows that schools serving similarly disadvantaged populations vary widely in their approaches and results, while Boocock (2011) describes an Osaka school subjecting its socially disadvantaged children to dull, drill-focused teaching that deviates from more commonly reported styles of elementary teaching and fails to stimulate learning.

Elementary education generally emphasizes learning to help others, cooperate, and see oneself as part of an interdependent community, not just as an individual. By sharing responsibilities, children learn that everyone can and should contribute to the general welfare. Lessons are also based strongly on a belief in the efficacy of learning from one another. This does not exclude individual difference and originality. Most teachers welcome and encourage the expression of different ideas. In recent years, Integrated Studies has been used both to encourage individual learning projects and to promote moral and social education. By selective use of small-group teaching and differentiated learning, teachers have sought to respond better to the academic needs of individual children, especially in the context of a renewed focus on basic academic attainment. However, the fundamental belief in interdependence and cooperation remains, and many if not most schools see strong classroom cohesion and peer learning as vital for academic progress.

Junior High Education

The emphasis on cooperation and team spirit continues during the three years of junior high school, the second stage of the nine years of compulsory education in Japan. This emphasis is exemplified by preparations for the cultural festival of October 2007 at Yoned a Junior High, a school of about four hundred students in a rural district of Sakura (see figure 11.1). Like the sports day held a few weeks before, this major event involves every student in the school. One message of this inclusiveness is that everyone matters. Being a good contributor is more important than being a star. A second message, frequently repeated at every level of Japanese schooling, is that if everyone combines powers (chikara o awaseru), great things can be accomplished. Working together, not the brilliance of isolated individuals, is presented as the key to success. After lessons end, the Yoned a students work in groups to create artworks from everyday materials, such as plastic bottles or drinks cans, and build versions of fairground games from wood and painted cardboard.

However, the Yoned a cultural festival also offers individuals the opportunity
FIGURE 11.1
Students preparing for the cultural festival at Yoneda Junior High School
to shine, particularly in the plays that each grade performs. These performances allow the dramatically inclined to declaim before the entire school, as well as providing major responsibilities for students who act as directors. The cultural festival is also the time when members of the school art club put their works on display for the rest of the school to view.

Extra-curricular club activities (*bukatsudō*) also mix emphases on common endeavor and individual talent. Such activities are a major feature of Japanese junior high and high schools (Cave 2004). Although not mandated by the national curriculum, they are ubiquitous, absorbing huge amounts of students’ and teachers’ time and energy. Schools generally offer a range of both sports and cultural clubs. Popular sports clubs include baseball, soccer, track and field, swimming, volleyball, basketball, table tennis, tennis, kendo, and judo. The most popular culture clubs are generally the brass and woodwind band and the art club. Top-level high schools tend to offer a wider range of culture clubs, springing from the interests of the students themselves. With the exception of the band, culture clubs are often run in a relaxed way, meeting just once or twice a week. Sports clubs, however, expect dedication, usually practicing for an hour or two on weekdays and generally on one if not both days of the weekend. Because practice takes place almost every day all year round (including most of the vacations), a student cannot join more than one sports club; and though changing clubs is usually possible, it is not encouraged. The implicit, and sometimes explicit, messages are that students should be devoted to a single thing (*hitotsu no koto ni uchikomu*) and should keep going to the end (*saigo made ganbaru*), deeply held values in Japan. An important side effect is that students cannot be all-round stars—regardless how talented they are athletically; for example, they cannot join both the baseball and soccer teams. Such a restriction might seem hard on the highly talented, but on the other hand, it allows more students the chance to take a leading role. It is thus a system that favors encouraging the talents and efforts of many, rather than a few outstanding athletes. Yet this does not deny recognition to individuals, for it is individual performance that decides which students are chosen to play in the regular inter-school tournaments.

Junior high is also the start of serious individual academic assessment. Midterm and end-of-term tests become a major feature of school life, largely determining grades. Students also know that progress to high school, the next stage of education, depends on their performance as individuals in the high school entrance exam.

In today’s first period at Yoneda, one second-year class has a social studies
lesson. Having studied geography during the first year, students are now studying history and will study civics in their final year. The class is nearing the end of the textbook, which starts in prehistory, about five million years ago, and gives a compact chronological account reaching up to the present day in about 230 pages. Generally speaking, the content of two textbook pages is to be covered in each fifty-minute lesson, a pace that does not allow the teacher, Mr. Kasuga, much time. Today’s lesson deals with the latter stages of World War II. Mr. Kasuga spends the first ten minutes questioning the students about the basic facts covered in the textbook, using projections of a map of the war zone and a photo of fighting on Saipan. There are always several students ready to raise their hands and answer. He then gives out a copy of a letter relating war memories from a book entitled Onnatachi no taiheiyō sensō (Women and the Pacific War), reads it out, and then talks about what he has heard from his grandparents about their war experiences, ending with the words sensō akan (“war is no good” in Kansai dialect). He encourages the students to ask their own grandparents about their war experiences. Next, he moves on to the invasion of Okinawa, the southernmost islands of the Japanese archipelago and the only part of Japan to be invaded during the war. He talks about how school students were recruited to serve the war effort, specifically mentioning the Himeyuri Butai (Star Lily Corps), a group of female students recruited as field hospital nurses, most of whom were killed in the fighting (Watanabe 2001, 143–145). After writing on the blackboard a few key points for the students to copy down, Mr. Kasuga talks about the untruthful way that the war was reported to the Japanese people, so that they were encouraged to fight to the end. He hands out a copy of part of the well-known graphic novel Hadashi no Gen (Barefoot Gen), explaining that many people in Okinawa killed themselves, as shown in the manga, and that some claim they were instructed to do so. Having spent about twenty-five minutes using these supplementary materials to deepen students’ appreciation of the content outlined in the textbook, for the remaining fifteen or so minutes he reverts to his earlier approach, asking students a series of questions about the section on the defeat of Italy and Germany and then writing key points on the blackboard for them to copy down. The lesson is probably fairly typical of history teaching in Japan’s junior high schools (Cave 2003). With so much material to cover in so little time, teachers generally find it difficult to engage students in analysis and discussion. Nonetheless, most teachers do their best to interest students in the subject matter and deepen their understanding by introducing information and materials additional to those in the textbook.
Besides acquiring basic historical knowledge and understanding, students are gaining disciplined study habits. They learn to take notes—some social studies teachers explicitly teach students strategies for organizing their notes—and later use the notes to revise for tests and examinations.

As it happens, this lesson was not the first time the second-year students had encountered the story of the Star Lily Corps, as it had been the subject matter of the play performed by the third-year students at the previous year’s cultural festival and had made a big impact on the audience, some of whom had been in tears as they watched. The anti-war message that has featured strongly in Japanese culture since the end of World War II (Orr 2001) can thus be conveyed in various ways in schools.

Integrated Studies was introduced into junior high schools in 2002, as into elementary schools (Bjork 2011; Cave 2011b). Most junior high teachers greeted it with caution or skepticism, being unused to teaching beyond their own subjects and worried that the kind of active learning Integrated Studies demanded would threaten school discipline, a major concern at this stage of education. Moreover, as teachers at Yoneda and other junior high schools in Sakura explained, responsibilities for subject teaching, pastoral care, discipline, and clubs left very little time for the cooperative planning, curriculum creation, and resource preparation that Integrated Studies needed. In the words of Yoneda’s Integrated Studies coordinator, Mr. Mori, “Schools don’t have the time, and I don’t think teachers have that level of capacity. . . . We’ve only just got our heads above water.” As a result, schools tended to fill much Integrated Studies time by expanding existing activities, such as workplace experience, careers study, and preparatory study for the third-year school trip. At Yoneda, first-year students also undertook a research project about their chosen aspect of the prefecture’s history, culture, life, or natural environment, including visits to sites such as museums or nature study centers. As at elementary schools, Yoneda and other junior high schools used Integrated Studies in part for social and moral education, trying to get students to think about the good of society and empathize with the needs of others. As part of the Integrated Studies curriculum at Yoneda, first-year students visited local welfare facilities for the elderly or people with disabilities. Meanwhile, third-year students studied “universal design,” an approach to making the built environment easy for all to use. Hamamoto (2009, 130–145, 193–195) reports similar activities at two junior high schools in low-income areas of Osaka, though unlike schools in Sakura, the Osaka schools also spent time studying marginalized communities with an important presence in Osaka, such as Koreans or burakumin; some teachers
framed all these studies of groups subject to discrimination or disadvantage (including the elderly and those with disabilities) as “human rights education,” interpreted as learning to understand the feelings of others and care for them. Junior high teachers have been more comfortable using Integrated Studies for these kinds of long-standing aims than for the 2002 curricular reform’s aims of fostering exploratory, self-motivated learning, which teachers have tended to see as impractical, whether in Sakura, Niigata (Bjork 2011), or Osaka (Hamamoto 2009). The reduction of Integrated Studies time to allow more hours for academic subjects in the curriculum revision implemented in 2012 (Cave 2011b, 160) was an acknowledgment that the new initiative had not fulfilled government expectations.

Teachers have been much more positive about small-group teaching (usually implemented in mathematics and English), funded by the Ministry of Education and Science from 2001 onward. At Yoneda, students learned mathematics and English in classes of 15–20 students, half the size of classes in other subjects, for two of their three years at the school. Teachers welcomed the increased attention they could give students and the accompanying improvement in student motivation, although there was little evidence of changes in teaching methods to take advantage of the more favorable conditions. The ministry has also encouraged differentiated learning in proficiency groups, but like elementary schools, many junior high schools have been cautious about this, introducing it mainly in mathematics and generally in a minority of lessons (Monbukagakushō 2009). At Yoneda, students were taught in proficiency groups for only the more demanding latter section of each textbook unit and were allowed to choose which group to join, subject to advice from the teacher, an approach that seems widespread (Cave 2008). Many teachers continued to be uncomfortable about treating students differentially, partly out of long-established egalitarian beliefs and partly because of fears that any gains might be canceled out by loss of motivation and lower expectations among students in lower proficiency groups.

During the nine years of compulsory education, the vast majority of Japanese children attend their local public schools, experiencing little differentiation and considerable emphasis on solidarity and cooperation. At the same time, the structure of the educational system and the organization of learning at junior high individuate students within a competitive structure. Students must take an entrance examination to progress to high school. For most, this will be the prefectural public high school exam, which is set in five subjects—Japanese, English, mathematics, science, and social studies. The exam for each
subject takes 40–50 minutes, depending on the prefecture. Since students can usually apply to only one public high school, and they do so before the exam takes place, it is important for them to estimate correctly how good their exam performance will be. Because of the possibility of failure, they also need to apply to a less demanding private high school as a backup. Some students, especially in major cities, also apply to a high-ranking private school as their first choice and take the entrance exam set by that school. Guiding students through this complex process is part of the job of junior high teachers.

For those who want extra help with studies, juku (private tutorial and test-preparation schools or programs) offer extra tuition at evenings and weekends (Roesgaard 2005; Rohlen 1980). Children may not feel they understand school lessons well enough, or their parents may be dissatisfied with their study habits. Juku are diverse. Most provide tuition aimed at passing high school entrance exams (shingaku juku), often using a didactic teaching style much like lessons at school and in similar-sized classes. Others (hoshū juku) focus on helping slower learners understand material already studied at school, providing more individually oriented tuition. Some teachers are full-time employees, while others are part-timers—often university students or even retired schoolteachers. To enroll in a top juku, students must often pass an entrance exam. While schools emphasize group solidarity, juku have a contrasting focus on individual aspiration and achievement. A typical exam-focused juku will offer junior high students a package of three compulsory evening lessons a week, one each in mathematics, Japanese, and English, often rising to five lessons a week (adding science and social studies) in the final year. This package may cost about ¥25,000–35,000 ($300–420 at $1 = ¥80) a month. The cost is manageable for many families, a fact that helps to explain why juku enrollment rates are so high—according to Benesse, a major producer of educational materials with its own research institute, 43 percent of junior high students attended juku in 2006 (Benesse Kenkyū Kyōiku Kaihatsu Sentā 2006). However, lower-income families can find such fees an unmanageable strain (Slater 2010, 147). An alternative is to use study aids such as Benesse’s own Shinken Zemi exercises, which are produced at different levels, from basic through regular to challenging, and in different versions tailored to each of Japan’s forty-seven prefectures. Benesse claims that one in five junior high students uses Shinken Zemi; in 2012 a monthly subscription cost just over ¥6,000 ($75 at $1 = ¥80) (Benesse Corporation 2012).

It is often argued that juku are a major means of class reproduction in Japan and that middle-class students who can better afford them use them
to develop “strategies for maximization which improve their chances of high exam scores” (Slater 2010, 151). This is a plausible argument. However, research by Kariya (2010) finds that test scores are better correlated with cultural capital than with juku attendance, suggesting that juku may often reinforce learning competencies that ultimately stem from habits and cultural knowledge acquired through the family. What both Kariya and Slater show is that there are stark differences in study behavior and academic aspiration among Japanese children, and these are strongly associated with family background, whether theorized in terms of greater or less cultural capital (Kariya) or in terms of social class (Slater). Meanwhile, Shimizu (2004) finds that some Osaka junior high schools serving socially disadvantaged populations with low juku attendance outperform other schools in better-off areas with high juku attendance. Shimizu (2004, 231–234) suggests that such schools have a strong critical awareness of the impact of social class and cultural capital on children and purposefully seek to redress the balance, unusual in a country where education has tended to avoid confronting social class issues. These studies draw attention to the diversities within junior high education.

High School: The Great Divide

Though the Japanese high school system differentiates students according to academic performance (Okano and Tsuchiya 1999, 62–109; Rohlen 1983), within each high school there continues to be great stress upon the solidarity of all, with little or no differential treatment (tracking or setting) within programs. Most high schools offer a regular academic program. Nominally, all such programs follow the same curriculum, but there are large differences between the level of difficulty of regular programs at higher-ranking and lower-ranking schools. Students generally choose either the arts stream or the science stream from the second year onward. Besides regular academic programs, there are also vocational programs, usually provided by dedicated vocational high schools (most commonly commercial, industrial, and agricultural). Vocational programs and schools have been a feature of the Japanese education system for over a century. While such schools used to be a popular choice for students, producing well-trained graduates who went on to good careers, their popularity has declined in recent decades as credential inflation has taken place, and more and more students aspire to progress to university (Okano and Tsuchiya 1999, 65–66, 101–108). It has become much more difficult for vocational high schools to attract academically able students, although
the best still occupy a mid-ranking place in the high school hierarchy; there
is regional variation here too, with technical high schools stronger in Kyushu
than in the Tokyo region, for example (Hida et al. 2007). A small number of
high schools also offer specialized programs in subjects such as science and
mathematics, English, music, and art. Such programs are an innovation of the
last twenty years, part of the attempt to offer a more diverse range of educa-
tional options that allow students to develop individual interests and strengths
(Okano and Tsuchiya 1999, 214).

The extremes of high school education can be illustrated by history les-
sions observed at three Tokyo schools. The first takes place at perhaps the most
academically successful school in Japan, a national high school for boys that
is attached to a national university. A high proportion of its students enter To-
kyo University, Japan’s most prestigious. During this lesson, the teacher gives
an interesting and intellectually sophisticated lecture on how historians have
dealt with the Meiji period, when Japan modernized in the late nineteenth
century. The lesson ignores the students’ history textbook; later, the teacher
tells me that the students are bright enough to understand the textbook con-
tent without any extra explanation, allowing him to treat more advanced top-
ics in the lessons. Some of the students seem interested, others less so; the
teacher does not engage them in discussion or invite their questions, nor do
they offer any. There is no school uniform, and the school buildings are unre-
markable; judging from externals only, a visitor would never guess that this is
one of the nation’s academic powerhouses. (Table 11.2 summarizes the high
schools I discuss.)

The second lesson takes place at Ikegaoka, a private school for boys that
is only slightly less academically successful than its national rival but shares
the features of a somewhat shabby school building and no school uniform.
In fact, one of the boys taking the history lesson in the hot summer weather
wears nothing more than a pair of shorts. There is no reprimand; Ikegaoka is
well known for its liberal ethos. This lesson deals with the ancient civilizations
of the Indus Valley. Unlike the lesson at the national school, this lesson deals
with a textbook topic in a relatively orthodox way; similar lessons on this sub-
ject, taught in a similar lecture style, could be observed at other high schools
throughout Japan, though not necessarily as well taught and at such a high
level. The teacher is a graduate of Tokyo University and himself a contributing
author to a high school history textbook. Though Ikegaoka is one of Japan’s top
private schools, the fees are relatively modest—less than ¥800,000 yen ($9,600
at $1 = ¥80) annually—though still unaffordable for a low-income family.
The third lesson takes place at Shimoda, a low-level Tokyo public school. The topic is the 1815 Congress of Vienna. It is clear that the subject holds little or no interest for many of the students. Two girls have large mirrors open on their desks; with their lightly tanned skin, dyed brown hair, short skirts, and loose socks, they follow the then fashionable style for more rebellious high school girls. Five minutes after the lesson starts, another girl arrives and unceremoniously takes her seat at the back, sitting cross-legged on her chair (she is wearing tracksuit bottoms underneath her skirt) in a style that is decidedly not approved as feminine in Japan. She takes from her bag another large mirror and an equally large makeup case and spends the next twenty minutes carefully making herself up. After about ten minutes, the teacher comes by her seat and rather feebly suggests that she attend to the lesson, but his presence is ignored, and he moves away. It seems clear that this teacher, at least, has more or less given up the struggle to capture or compel all his students’ attention in the somewhat recondite subjects that the curriculum obliges him to teach them, though in another lesson that I observe the same day, I see a politics and economics teacher who is much more energetic and successful in engaging

### Table 11.2 List of high schools discussed in the text

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tokyo National</td>
<td>Central Tokyo</td>
<td>A national boys’ “laboratory” high school with a liberal ethos; among the most academically successful schools nationwide.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ikegaoka</td>
<td>Central Tokyo</td>
<td>A private boys’ high school with a liberal ethos; among the most academically successful schools nationwide.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shimoda</td>
<td>Tokyo suburbs</td>
<td>A public co-educational high school of below average academic level.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terakawa</td>
<td>Kansai suburbs</td>
<td>A public co-educational high school; among the most academically successful in the prefecture.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
his students. Nonetheless, the episode vividly illustrates two important aspects of education in Japan. The first is the inflexibility of the curriculum and the paucity of choice for students. Even at high school level, teachers’ ability to decide what they will teach is significantly limited by the constraints of a one-size-fits-all national curriculum designed on the assumption that all high school students should learn roughly the same content. The exceptions are those teachers (probably rather rare) who are sufficiently strong-minded to skip over parts of the textbook and focus in more depth on other parts. The assumption underlying the high school curriculum is that all students require education in certain basic subjects—including mathematics, English, science, and (as we have seen) world history; moreover, the content of the curriculum should fundamentally be the same for all, even down to what might seem unlikely topics, such as the Congress of Vienna. This assumption may have made sense when the national curriculum was first enforced at the end of the 1950s, when less than 60 percent of students went on to high school, but since the proportion of students going on to high school exceeded 90 percent in the mid-1970s (Monbukagakushō 2011a), it has become much more questionable, and it means that significant numbers of students are forced to endure lessons in subjects regarding which they have little or no aptitude or interest. This also means that students who really want to study particular subjects are hindered from doing so because teachers are obliged to tailor their lessons to the entire class of 30–40 students, including those who are only there on sufferance.

The second point illustrated by this episode is the reluctance of teachers to exert stringent discipline. This may seem an odd comment, given the common reputation of Japanese schools as places of strict control (Kerr 2001, 282–306). Certainly, in some respects Japanese schools do pay significant attention to discipline. At junior high school, in particular, there are generally thoroughgoing efforts to ensure punctuality, dress codes, and good order in general. Many high schools also pay attention to these things, especially those below average in the hierarchy. Yet if students remain unresponsive to teachers’ ca-joling, berating, visits to parents, and so on, there is generally great reluctance on the part of the school to take the final step and expel the student (a step that is in any case illegal during compulsory education). As Slater (2010, 154–158) illustrates, teachers at low-ranking high schools generally do all they can to enable students to graduate, and strive against daunting odds to maintain a sense of the school as a “moral community” and a place of meaningful learning. Schools tend to take the view that because exclusion will benefit neither
an individual student nor society in the longer term, such an extreme measure should only be taken when a student is so disruptive as to cause serious problems for the education of others. Teachers tend to consider that as long as a student is connected to the school and the social network that it represents, there is a continuing chance that he or she will reform. This may be a sensible view, given that some criminological theories argue that disaffection and delinquency among young people are often a passing phase from which they can emerge given time and patience (Downes and Rock 2003, 148–149; Sato 1991, 157–177). Certainly the approach has been linked with continued low crime rates throughout the post–World War II period (Hamai and Ellis 2006).

As shown by Kariya and Dore (2006, 143–147) and Slater (2010), socio-economic status and high school attendance are strongly related. According to one study, 76 percent of students at top private schools like Ikegaoka had professional and managerial parents, and only 6 percent had parents who were manual workers, while at the lowest-ranked high schools, the proportions were 35 percent and 22 percent respectively (Kariya and Dore 2006, 144). This relationship between social class and academic attainment seems to be strengthening, as discussed below.

Inequality and the “Disparity Society”

Significant disparities in motivation and achievement have been a feature of Japanese high schools for decades, but since the 1990s, such disparities have widened and have spread downward to the junior high and even elementary level, causing serious concern. According to one survey, the proportion of second-year junior high students who do not study at all outside school increased significantly between 1989 and 2001, with the greatest increase (43 percent to 59 percent) among students with poor basic life habits (such as not eating breakfast, brushing teeth, or sleeping at a set time); test scores in mathematics and Japanese also dropped (Kariya 2008, 37–49). Another survey of second-year students at eleven high schools found that the proportion of students who reported not studying at all outside school rose from 22 percent in 1979 to 35 percent in 1997 (Kariya 2008, 74–84). Recent surveys indicate a strong relationship among cultural capital, learning competencies, and performance in mathematics and Japanese (Kariya 2010), and repeat surveys at Tokyo high schools in 1979 and 1997 show a strengthening relationship between the socioeconomic status of a student’s family and the high school attended (Kariya and Dore 2006, 145). Though this relationship between social class
and academic attainment was clear even in the 1970s (Kariya 2010, 109–111; Kariya and Dore 2006, 145; Rohlen 1983), Kariya (2010, 110) argues that it has strengthened from the 1990s onward. Whereas there was relatively little public focus on inequality during the 1970s and 1980s, a period dominated by a sense that affluence was spreading and life chances were becoming more equal, inequality and the “disparity society” (kakusa shakai) have become major issues in the 2000s, as poorly paid, dead-end jobs become a permanent reality for many young people and socioeconomic polarization becomes more evident (Kariya 2010, 87–92).

The exact reasons for widening disparities in motivation and achievement at school need further research. What is clear, however, is that significant numbers of Japanese students no longer feel that it is worth putting in the hard work of studying. In part, this is likely to be due to a paradoxical combination of increasing affluence for many along with a sense of narrowing opportunities and increasing deprivation for some. The sense of narrowing opportunities results from the increasing difficulty that academic low-achievers face in securing a permanent job with good prospects and benefits, caused in turn by the stagnation in the Japanese economy since 1990 that has led firms to cut back on secure jobs in favor of contract and temporary positions, often with poor pay, conditions, and career prospects (Kariya 2010, 90–91). The increased deprivation comes not only from the direct pressures on youth employment, but also the squeeze on the pay and conditions of many older workers and the increased family pressures faced by many, especially as a result of rising divorce rates, which often leave the remaining parent (usually a working mother) in poverty or near poverty (Abe 2008). However, increased deprivation for some has gone along with increasing affluence in Japanese society as a whole, as a result of which Japan has become gradually more consumerist over the last quarter century; in Japan’s cities and suburbs, there are more and more shops, cafés, restaurants, and places of entertainment, filled with an ever-increasing range and variety of enticing goods and offering services undreamed of by the more diligent students of the 1970s, ranging from DVDs and Internet to video games and smart phone apps. In short, never have there been more temptations to forego deferred gratification in favor of having fun right here, right now, and even the considerable social and moral forces brought to bear by families and schools in Japan are insufficient to ward off such temptations completely.

Low motivation and academic achievement do not necessarily rule out education beyond high school, however. The proliferation of universities in
Japan, the majority private, combined with plummeting numbers of children, has left lower-level universities in a parlous situation in which some are willing to take even low achievers in order to come closer to filling their programs (Goodman 2010). Since Japanese universities tend to be very reluctant to fail students once they are admitted, even low achievers can often achieve a university degree. How much such a degree will ultimately benefit them is another matter, however, as employers are well aware of universities’ relative standing, and they recruit accordingly. Entering a prestigious university, in contrast, is achievable only through ability and effort; high-level universities recruit almost all their students via demanding entrance examinations, rather than using the softer methods, such as school recommendations or interviews, which are widely employed by lower-level institutions (“Iyoku aru gakusei erabu niwa” 2011). This difference does not mean that prestigious universities’ examination procedures are unproblematic. On the contrary, they remain largely dominated by multiple-choice and short-answer questions that test knowledge and understanding more than the ability to articulate ideas or analyze arguments, just as in the 1980s (Rohlen 1983, 94–95), and this examination method in turn has a deep effect on teaching at the high school level. For high-achieving students, therefore, little has changed in the educational landscape over the last twenty years, though the post-2008 global economic crisis has made the job market even more competitive, with no guarantees of a stable path to success. For low achievers, however, pressure has relaxed in the sense that mediocre or even poor school performance is no longer much of a barrier to higher education, even if the cachet the resulting degree brings is largely illusory.

**Internationalization and Foreign Language Education**

One of the buzzwords of Japanese educational reform in the 1980s was “internationalization” (kokusaika) (Goodman 2007). Yet a quarter-century later, there is still good reason to think that the education system fails to equip Japanese people well enough for international engagement. The average performance of Japanese students in the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) has been among the lowest in Asia (Ogawa 2011). The falling numbers of Japanese students studying abroad has also caused concern (Fukushima 2010; Nae and Fraysse-Kim 2012). Such is the case despite government initiatives to improve the situation, such as the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program, which has placed thousands of native-speaker language
assistants in schools each year since the late 1980s, and the Super English High School (SELHi) program, which funded about 150 high schools across Japan to undertake action research into improved English teaching (Aspinall 2011, 135–136). Since the early 1990s, a limited number of high schools have set up specialized programs for students who wish to focus on English study. Such programs may allow students to spend as many as ten or more hours a week studying English by their second or third year, and they usually include special events such as weekend “English camps” and opportunities for short-term or long-term study abroad. Such programs do result in better teaching and improved English abilities for some students. However, they are not necessarily found at the top-level high schools that take Japan’s most able students. The opportunities for the latter can be illustrated by two lessons observed in fall 2011 at Terakawa, a top-level public high school in the Kansai region. The first is a regular lesson for first-year students, taught by a young teacher who is himself a graduate of a specialized English high school program and who speaks English well. Despite the teacher’s qualifications, a major feature of the lesson is memorization and repetition of the reading text being studied. Students are hardly required to produce any English of their own, whether written or spoken. The number of students in the class—close to forty, as is standard—does not help. The second lesson is a third-year elective English lesson. This is very different; a mere ten or so students work in pairs, debating in English using their pre-prepared notes and switching partners every few minutes. Though their English is not perfect, they communicate successfully and enthusiastically. However, there are only two or three hours a week of electives, meaning that English lessons like this one are the experience of a small minority. It seems clear that the improvement of foreign language standards at the high school level still has a long way to go.

Overall, Japan’s foreign language education continues to be inadequate; the reluctance of university students to study abroad is the result partly of this inadequacy and partly of employers’ surprising apparent lack of interest in the qualities gained through overseas study. The introduction of “English activities” for one hour a week in the fifth and sixth grades of elementary school from 2011 (Ogawa 2011) is a half-hearted measure whose timidity speaks volumes about the deep ambivalence within Japan toward engagement with the outside world (Aspinall 2011). Similarly striking is the apparent lack of any sense that foreign language education in schools might need to encompass the teaching of Chinese, the language of Japan’s giant neighbor and surely one of the major global powers of the next century.
Stability or Stagnation?

As stated at the start of this chapter, what has changed over the last quarter-century in Japan’s schools is less striking than what has not. Efforts to promote more exploratory, interdisciplinary, and self-motivated learning at elementary and junior high schools have met with some success in elementary schools, but at the junior high level the response of teachers has generally been tepid or worse. These reform efforts coincided with slippage in the performance of Japanese students in the PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) academic attainment tests, providing ammunition for criticisms of the reforms and demands that schools get “back to basics” (Cave 2007, 20–21; Takayama 2008); in consequence, the revised school curriculum implemented from 2011 onward has cut back on hours for Integrated Studies, which was intended to promote independent thinking and self-motivated learning. Funding smaller class sizes in selected subjects has probably helped students who struggle academically by allowing them more teacher attention, but teaching methods may not have changed. At the high school level, meanwhile, there have been even fewer changes for most students, though the introduction of programs that allow some students to specialize in particular subjects has had a limited effect in increasing diversity. In part, this lack of change can be seen as recognition of the real strengths of the existing education system in combining solid academic training with attention to human development. Yet Japanese education can also be strongly criticized, especially at the secondary level, for failing to develop students’ particular strengths and for neglecting inquiry learning and the development of analytical, critical, and creative abilities (Cave 2011a, 253–254), while foreign language education remains a disaster area (Aspinall 2011). The limited attempts to tackle these problems over the last two decades have suffered from poor implementation, but there are more fundamental reasons for their lack of success and, indeed, for the fact that more ambitious measures have not been considered. At the junior high level, teachers are so busy fulfilling the heavy institutionalized demands upon them to provide academic basics, pastoral care, and discipline that they have minimal time or energy for pedagogic innovation (Cave 2011b). The same is true at high school, where the university entrance exam structure—which is largely outside state control—also stifles curricular or pedagogic change. Perhaps the most fundamental reason for the relative lack of change, however, is uncertainty on the part of the government and nation about what kind of society and state Japan should become in the twenty-first century. This uncertainty
has been strikingly reflected in the dramatic changes of direction in education policy over the last two decades. Increased emphasis on individuality, autonomy, and exploration, focused on Japan’s envisioned future needs, was first modified in the light of a “moral panic” about the supposed threat of social and moral disintegration to emphasize community and “education of the heart”; then, after a fierce debate about standards of academic attainment, came a partial reversion to the educational content and methods of earlier decades. Regardless of the rights and wrongs of these decisions, they are evidence of powerful nostalgia for the values and practices of the past—a past differently constructed by different people but generally featuring a highly selective and idealized picture of well-socialized, energetic, and bright-eyed youngsters full of motivation, living in warm families, and spending their free time exploring the natural environment or interacting with the local community. In short, there is a desire to return to the imagined “glory days” between the start of the “high-growth period” in 1955 and the bursting of the bubble economy in 1990, and it is this desire—albeit generally unexpressed in such direct terms—that has been most influential in driving the actions of teachers and the arguments of pundits. What this fails to recognize is that schools alone cannot adequately provide the resources for human development that used to be provided by children’s social and natural environment, especially without a significant change in the proportion of national wealth that goes into education. The resulting lack of vision or direction, moreover, leaves education in danger of aimless drift and unable to equip Japan’s children as might be desired for the challenge of adapting to a fast-changing future. Arguably, what children are likely to need are habits of inquiry, exploration, and proactive problem solving, along with the creative ability to come up with new ideas and the critical rigor to test such ideas to destruction. In the existing education system, such habits and abilities are not as well developed as they could be. Moreover, the system as it stands is also failing to equip children to operate internationally, even though it is now twenty-five years since Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro’s Education Council made “internationalization” a key goal of educational reform (Goodman 2007).

I would suggest, therefore, that the state of education in Japan is an index of the state of Japan itself. In many respects school education continues to be excellent, developing children’s social and emotional capacities alongside their intellectual abilities. Yet like the wider society, schools are grappling with problems of increased inequality, and a loss of confidence about Japan’s future has resulted in inward- and backward-looking tendencies that have strongly
affected education. School education in Japan has a stability and strength of quality that many other countries might envy, but without greater willingness to confront the challenges of the future, this stability stands in real danger of turning into gradual stagnation. The extent to which it changes will tell us much about what kind of country Japan wants to be.

Notes

1. The Japanese public school system is noted for a relatively high degree of nationwide standardization of facilities and academic attainment within compulsory education (elementary and junior high school) (Okano and Tsujiya 1999, 60). In the Ministry of Education and Science's 2007 National Academic Achievement Tests in Japanese and mathematics, for example, average total scores for junior high students in forty-one of Japan's forty-seven prefectures were within 10 percent of the average total score nationwide (286.1 out of a maximum 400). Scores were not generally affected by degree of urbanization, though the top scores were in rural prefectures (Fukui, Toyama, and Akita) (“Osaka 45-banme, Akita, Fukui toppu” 2007).


3. Sakura is a pseudonym, as are the names of schools and teachers. Like many “cities” (shi) in Japan, Sakura includes an urban core and suburban and semi-rural surrounds. Income in its prefecture is close to the national average, and education levels a little higher. Eighty percent of the city population live in owner-occupied dwellings, higher than the national average of 60 percent. The Kansai region includes the six prefectures around the major cities of Osaka, Kyoto, and Kobe.

4. At the schools studied by Shimizu (2004, 2008) and Boocock (2011), there are significant numbers of children from the burakumin community, “a castelike minority group” (Nabeshima 2010, 109) that has suffered from severe discrimination and whose children have academic achievement well below the national average.

5. For examples, see the Web sites of Ina Gakuen High School in Saitama Prefecture (http://www.inagakuen.spec.ed.jp/comm2/htdocs/?page_id=78) and Kokusai Jōhō High School in Shiga Prefecture (http://www.kokujo-h.shiga-ec.ed.jp/).

6. For example, in a letter to the Asahi Shinbun (July 7, 2011), one 2007 university graduate tells how her year’s study abroad made job-hunting harder, as companies saw her delayed graduation at the wrong time of year (September) as problematic.

7. For examples of significant documents infused by such nostalgia for an imagined past, see the 2000 report by the National Commission for Educational Reform, set up by former prime minister Obuchi Keizō (http://www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/education/report/report.html; accessed May 17, 2012); Fujiwara Masahiko’s (2005) best-seller Kokka no hinkaku; Prime Minister Abe Shinzō’s (2006) book
According to the OECD (2011, 221), in 2008 Japan spent $8,301 per student in primary, secondary, and post-secondary non-tertiary education, slightly above the OECD average of $8,169. Its spending was very similar to that of Canada ($8,388) and Finland ($8,068); lower than the Netherlands ($9,251), the United Kingdom ($9,169), and the United States ($10,995); but higher than Germany ($7,859) and South Korea ($6,723). According to the Japanese Ministry of Education and Science (Monbukagakushō 2011b, 36), in 2009 there were 14.5 children per teacher in lower secondary education (12.2 in upper secondary) in Japan, compared to 16.6 (14.7) in Canada, 10.1 (16.6) in Finland, 15.1 (13.9) in Germany, 19.9 (16.7) in South Korea, 16.1 (12.3) in the United Kingdom, and 14.3 (15.1) in the United States (OECD average, 13.5). Thus Japan devotes similar levels of resources to school education as do comparable countries. Japan may be unusual, however, in the very high expectations on its teachers to provide substantial guidance and support for human development, an effort that takes time away from pedagogical engagement (Cave 2011b). In short, Japan may be expecting much more than other countries from similar levels of resources, and these expectations may be unrealistic.

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