

Figure 4: Work Preference (percentage)

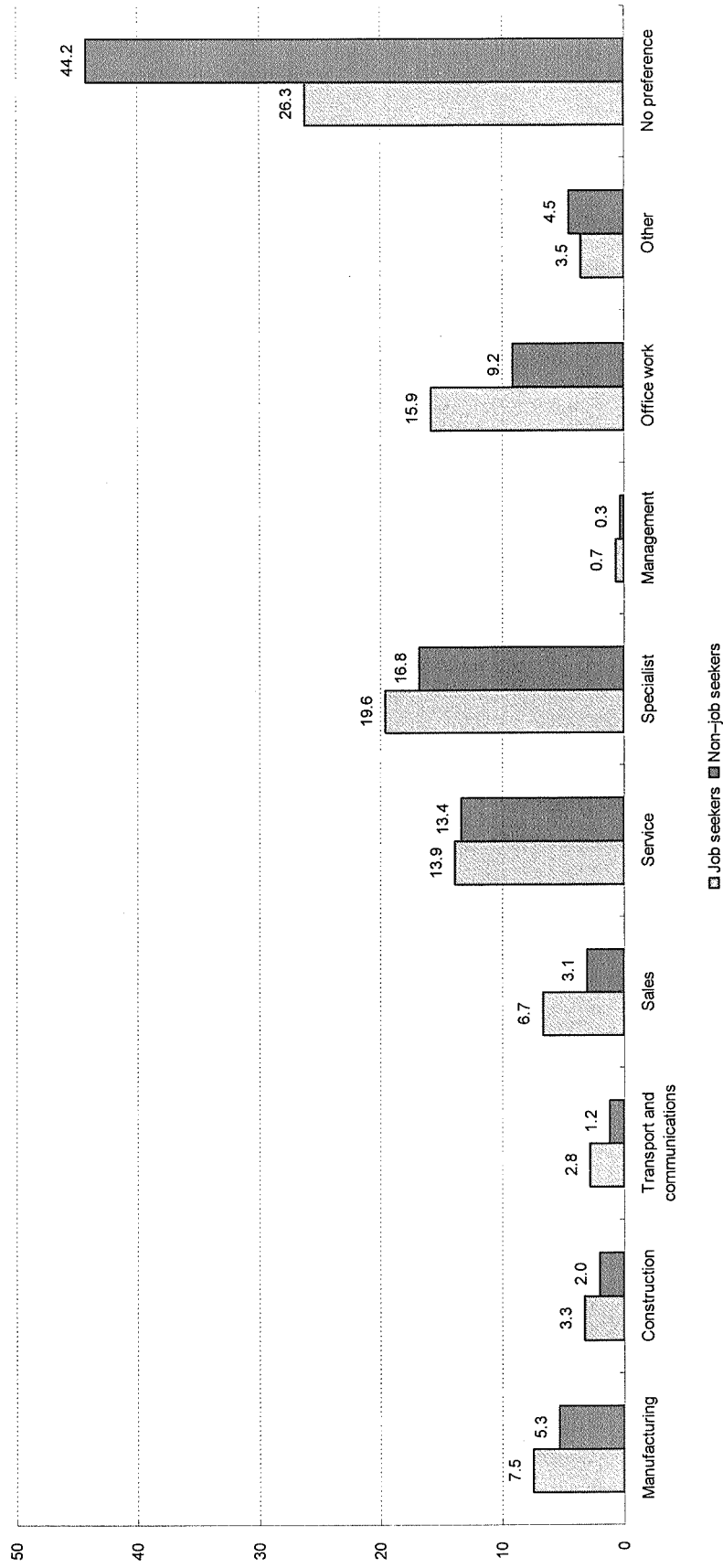
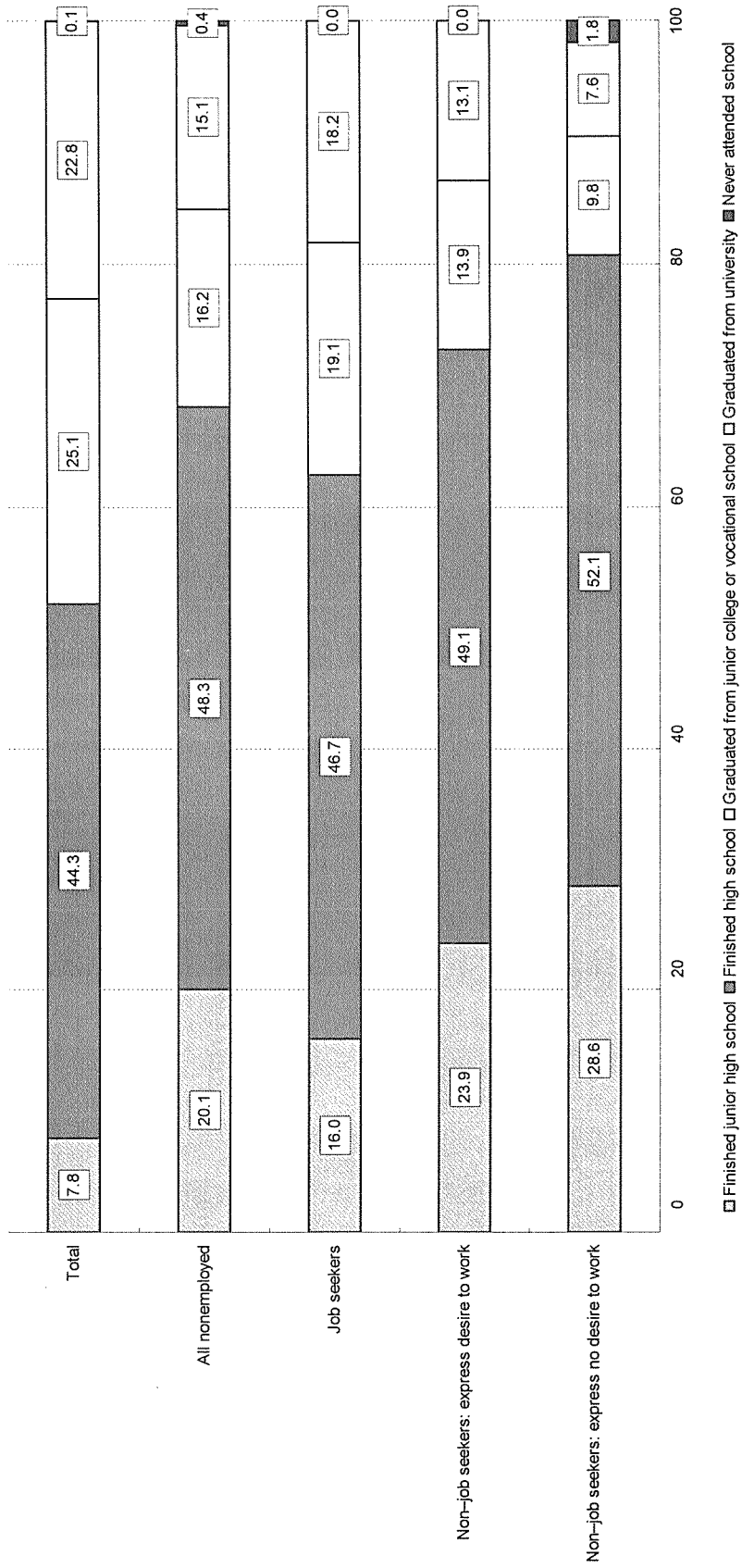


Figure 5: Highest Educational Attainment (percentage, 2002)



**Figure 6: Percentage Who Have Work Experience**

2002	Nonemployed total	Job seekers	Non-job seekers:	
			express	Non-job seekers: express no desire to work
<b>Aged 15 to 34</b>				
15 to 19	65.5	78.3	62.0	29.9
20 to 24	36.2	49.6	34.4	9.4
25 to 29	59.6	70.1	52.3	26.8
30 to 34	74.1	86.8	68.8	37.2
	76.5	93.2	76.5	36.8
1997				
<b>Aged 15 to 34</b>				
15 to 19	56.6	70.6	55.8	24.3
20 to 24	21.3	34.8	21.3	4.2
25 to 29	54.7	66.6	48.9	20.5
30 to 34	71.0	83.6	70.2	39.0
	70.5	88.3	71.8	36.1
1992				
<b>Aged 15 to 34</b>				
15 to 19	53.8	73.1	56.6	22.0
20 to 24	19.1	37.3	23.4	3.0
25 to 29	58.1	74.8	55.5	23.5
30 to 34	71.6	86.7	70.6	42.6
	63.5	86.8	66.4	31.0

Figure 7: Japanese Aged 15 to 34—Annual Household Income of More than ¥10 million (percentage)

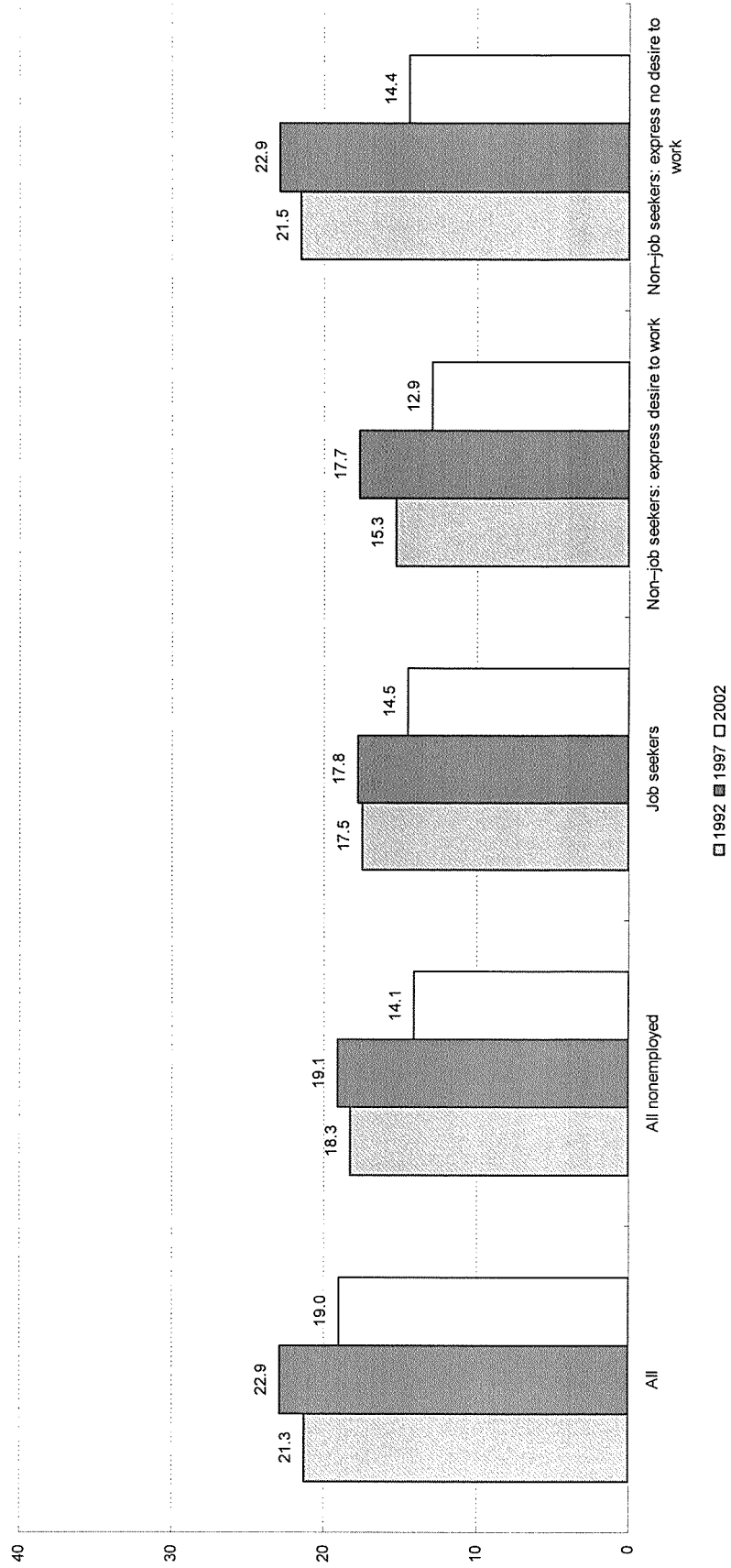


Figure 8: Japanese Aged 15 to 34—Annual Household Income of Less than ¥3 million (percentage)

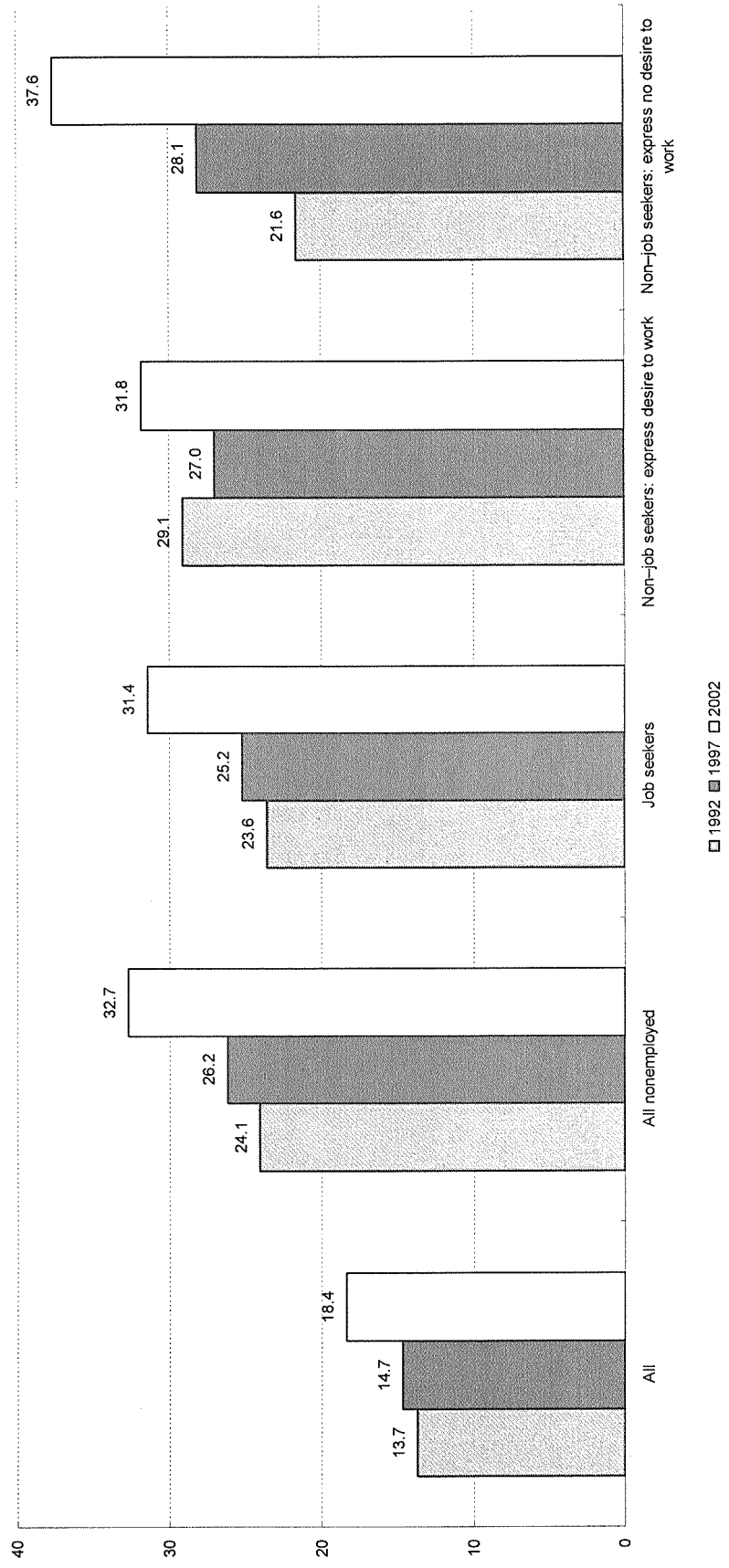
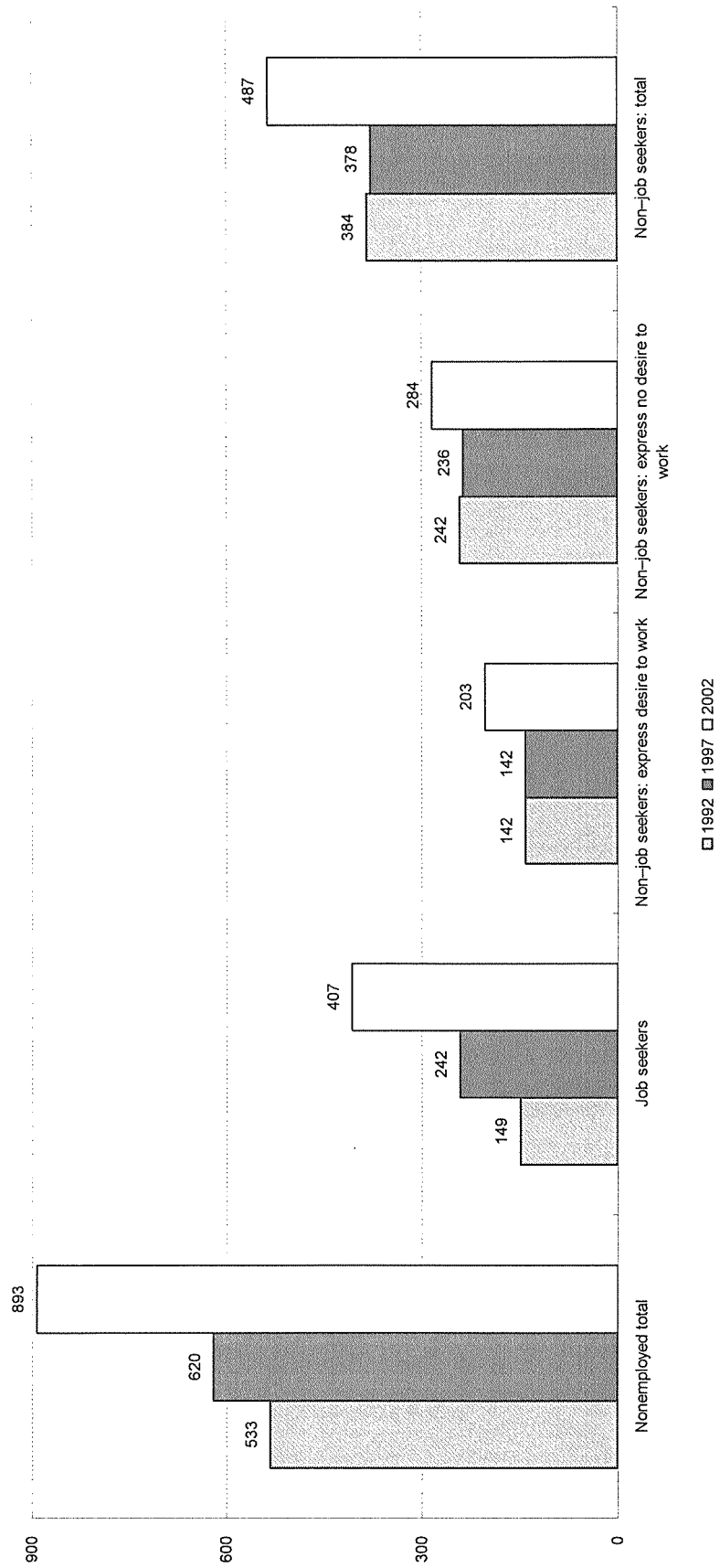


Figure 9: Nonemployed Japanese Aged 35 to 49 by Stance (thousands)



## Chapter 4

# Hidden Educational Inequalities in Postwar Japan: Misconceptions and Reconceptions

Takehiko Kariya

### 1. Introduction

After World War II, much influenced by the policies of the US-led occupation administration, Japan developed an education system that was extremely liberal by the global standards of the day. This was the so-called 6-3-3 system, with nine years of compulsory education divided into six years at elementary school and three years at junior high school, followed by three more years at non-compulsory senior high school. In pre-war Japan, the education system had learned from European models, which meant just six years of compulsory education, after which only a small male elite would be offered the chance of middle and high school education. Compared with that, and indeed compared with mid-century education systems in Britain, France, Germany and other advanced European countries, the postwar Japanese system could fairly be described as being based on extremely progressive ideals, being designed specifically to realize the social ideal of equal opportunity.

Moreover, the new system was informed by a powerful spirit of egalitarianism, in some ways even outstripping the realities of the American model on which it was based. As we shall see in greater detail later on, American practices such as ability grouping and tracking, which created distinctions between students and sorted them on the basis of ability or achievement, did not gain wide acceptance in Japan's new junior high schools. At the same time, regional differences in educational environment stemming from financial differences between different school districts were kept to an absolute minimum. The net result was to make possible a degree of egalitarianism that exceeded anything seen in America at the time.

By the time we entered the 1980s and 1990s, Japanese education was being praised by American sociologists such as Cummings (1980) and Stevenson and Stigler (1992), for its success in turning out pupils who scored very well in international comparative tests, while also exhibiting a low degree of deviation in scores, indicating considerable success in achieving equality of outcomes. At least until the early 1990s, Japanese education was widely seen as a success story for other countries to imitate, combining high standards with equality of opportunity and]outcome.

That said, there was also a negative side to the reputation of Japanese education. Competition to pass entrance examinations to elite high schools and universities had intensified to the point where ‘exam hell’ became a cliché; education designed to help students survive that hell was overly focused on rote memorization, stuffing students with knowledge while stifling their individuality and creativity; a highly centralized system allowed the Ministry of Education to impose a conformist approach to pedagogy that prevented teachers from acting freely and made it difficult to realize diversity in education; and so on. Eventually these criticisms started to impact on policy makers, and the 1990s saw the start of a series of educational reforms.

Very well; let us now consider how postwar Japanese education handled the problem of educational inequality. Could it be that behind the general image of Japan as a society that succeeded in creating an egalitarian education system, inequality has in fact been spreading gradually through the system? I will also discuss the apparent paradox of a system that has aimed for equality while at the same time generating intense competition. What is the relationship between those two phenomena? And what about the recent educational reforms, designed to solve the problems of a society obsessed with educational credentials: how have they impacted on educational equality? In this chapter, while focusing on education, I will seek to clarify the complex relations between equality and inequality in postwar Japan.

First I will take a look back at the developing relationship between education and society in postwar Japan, showing how the discourse of educationalists loudly advocating egalitarianism served to conceal elements of inequality in education. Secondly, I will show how the reality of an education system driven by an egalitarian ideology actually contributed to exacerbating the ‘diploma disease’ (Dore 1976) in Japanese society and the intensification of educational competition in a credential-governed society. Thirdly, I will draw attention to another paradox: the fact that educational reforms rooted in a critique of the educational-credential society have actually served to further widen inequality within the education system.

## 2. Establishment of the Mass Education Society<sup>1</sup>

### 2.1 Distaste for academic ranking of students – where it came from

Many Japanese people of the postwar generations have a strong dislike for anything that smacks of treating children differently according to their ability or school grades.

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<sup>1</sup> See Kariya (1995) for a more detailed version of the analysis in this section.



Separating students on that sort of basis is seen by many as a sure way to generate dropouts and delinquents. That view is also quite prevalent among both educators and lay Japanese people. Ranking students in order of ability, or treating students differently according to their grades – this has been viewed as a form of discrimination, and a generally Bad Thing. This way of thinking about education is deeply embedded in both Japanese people and educators’ consciousness of the education profession, and is generally taken for granted.

A pioneering example of this view of education may be found in a report compiled in 1974 by the Committee to Re-examine the Education System (*Kyō’iku Seido Kentō I’inkai*), which was a committee of top-flight educational scholars assembled by the teachers’ union, Nikkyōso. I quote:

“We categorize children according to their ‘grades,’ we rank them higher or lower in terms of their ‘ability,’ we separate those that will go on to higher levels of education from those that will not, we classify high schools into ordinary and occupational schools, we discriminate between boys and girls, we rank schools from first rate down to n<sup>th</sup> rate; we select. That gives rise to an intense but cold ideology of competition among the children. In this way, our nation’s tendency towards credentialism is strengthened, and our schools become bloody battlefields of competition for educational credentials. This situation is what so-called ‘meritocracy’ (*nōryokushugi*) has wrought.” (*Kyō’iku Seido Kentō I’inkai* 1974: 54).

“Meritocracy is the great evil devastating education today, and should be called the root of all educational evils.” (Ibid: 82)

From the 1960s to the late 1990s, Japanese educators were in the grip of a way of thinking that viewed the ranking of children in terms of ability and achievement as a very serious educational problem. Underlying this way of thinking was a particular understanding of the ‘educational credential society.’ Because Japan was a society obsessed with educational credentials, ranking inevitably happened, reflecting performance in tests and *hensachi* scores, designed to rank every child in the country along a bell curve based on standard deviation principles. That ranking led to bullying, delinquency etc. We saw a chain reaction, as one educational problem led to another.

It therefore seems appropriate to ask ourselves how this perception, equating meritocracy with discriminatory/selective education, came into being.

## 2.2 The meaning of the word ‘discrimination’ as in ‘discriminatory / selective education’

It is true that Japanese teachers tend to think of any attempt to treat students differently according to their ability or achievement, as ‘meritocratic discrimination’ (*nōryokushugiteki sabetsu*) or ‘discriminatory / selective education’ (*sabetsu-senbatsu kyō'iku*). However, from an international comparative perspective, this is not necessarily a universally shared perception. Even to translate the Japanese word *sabetsu* into the English word ‘discrimination’ creates semantic and cognitive problems.

Looking up the English words ‘discriminate’ and ‘discrimination’ in Webster’s Third New International Dictionary (published in 1966), we find that alongside a number of neutral definitions, meaning simply to distinguish between different things and treat them accordingly, there is also the following definition which corresponds closely to what Japanese educators mean when they speak of ‘discriminatory treatment’ (*sabetsuteki taigū*):

*Discriminate* “to make a difference in treatment or favor on a class or categorical basis in disregard of individual merit”

*Discrimination* “the act, practice, or instance of discriminating categorically rather than individually”

Clearly the English concept of ‘discrimination’ does not include differential treatment caused by differences in individual ability or achievement. Rather, it pertains to *unjustly* differentiated treatment based not on qualities of the individual but on social categories such as class, race/ethnicity, gender, place of birth, etc.

This is not just a matter of dictionary definitions. A lot of research has been done by American or British educationalists on the issue of equality of opportunity in education, but virtually none of it equates differential treatment based on individual ability with ‘discrimination’ (Kariya 1995). When Euro-American research talks about ‘discrimination’ it is referring strictly to the kind of definition cited above – differential treatment based on class, race/ethnicity, gender etc. – and not to distinctions reflecting individual ability or achievement.

That being so, it would appear reasonable to describe the shared concern with *nōryokushugiteki sabetsu* (discrimination based on merit) and *sabetsu/senbatsu Kyō'iku*

(selective-discriminative education) as particular to Japanese society.

With that in mind, I will now take a look at the social and historical background to the emergence of this tendency in postwar Japan to link the concept of pedagogy differentiated according to ability/achievement with the concept of ‘discrimination.’

### 2.3 The National Education Study Group and concern over the sense of discrimination among pupils

The mainstream teaching union in postwar Japan has been the Japan Teachers Union (Nihon Kyōshoku'in Kumiai), generally known by its abbreviated Japanese name, Nikkyōso. From a certain point in its development, Nikkyōso developed a critique of the Ministry of Education that condemned its education policy as ‘meritocracy’ (*nōryokushugi*). Nikkyōso held its first national conference in 1952, and part of that conference was a National Educational Research Meeting (*Zenkoku Kyō'iku Kenkyū Shūkai*). Since then Nikkyōso has continued to hold these annual research meetings right up to the present day. The proceedings are published annually under the title ‘Education in Japan’ (*Nihon no Kyō'iku*). A careful look through the back issues of this publication gives us a chance to trace how the debate on selective-discriminatory education developed over the years within the Japanese teaching profession.

One of the reports presented at the very first research meeting in 1952 discussed the distinction between general education (*futsūka*) and occupational education (*shokugyōka*) in senior high schools. Here is a passage from that report:

“I also feel that there is a problem with occupational guidance in junior high schools. For instance, even if students go straight into employment from the general education track at senior high school, there is still a strongly lingering discriminatory consciousness regarding the general course and the occupational course, both among ourselves and in society.... In the end the whole point of the 6-3 system is to keep all the students together. Or are we going to abandon that point, and start using the two types of school in all the school districts in the prefecture, in which case... the discriminatory consciousness will get bigger and bigger, and will linger on in the form of discriminatory treatment in society at large.” (*Education in Japan*, Vol. 1, 1952, p. 65. Further references will just use ‘EJ’ and the year.)

In this report, the expression ‘discriminatory consciousness’ (*sabetsu-kan*) is used to refer to the pupils’ preference for general education, and the teachers’ tendency

to prioritize the general education course, in the choice between general education and occupational education. In the early 1950s, then, Japanese school teachers were sensitive about the distinction between general and occupational education and saw it as embodying a discriminatory consciousness.

Another distinction that caused concern was that between day schools and night schools, or in Japanese terminology those using the ‘all-day system’ (*zennichi-sei*) versus those using the ‘fixed time system’ (*teiji-sei*). Yet a third was that between those students who went on to senior high school and those who did not. There was much discussion at the research meetings about the feelings of inferiority and rejection that could result from being on the wrong side of these educational divides. Consider for example this statement, from a teacher talking about extra lessons that were provided in some education districts for pupils planning to continue their education beyond the compulsory years:

“There is a general consensus among the reports that this intensifying trend towards extra lessons brings many harmful effects, to teachers as well as pupils... particularly in the case of students who are not going on to higher levels of education, we hear it said that “schools are obsessed with getting students into the next level, and so tend to forget about the students who are not planning to do that,” and that “because of that, those students tend to get the feeling that they are forgotten things, and start to feel inferior and wronged” (EJ 1955: 593).

Here, extra classes for students with higher academic ambitions are described as “fundamentally warping senior high-school and junior high-school education” (EJ 1955: 593). At the same time, one of the reasons given for the problematic nature of these classes was that they did not include pupils planning to go straight into the job market from school, and hence caused them to feel “inferior and wronged.”

This view, problematizing discriminatory consciousness, gave rise to the first use of the term ‘discriminatory education’ (*sabetsu kyō'iku*), during a debate at the 1958 meeting on the evils of extra classes:

“Even without being divided into separate classes, these students feel inferior and wronged. Creating separate classes will merely incite a stronger discriminatory consciousness among the pupils” (report from Kumamoto prefecture).

“(1) Creates distortions in inter-pupil relations, such as divisions, antagonism

and feelings of superiority and inferiority; (2) results in creating education emphasizing academic advancement, leading to the emergence of an advancement-oriented school within the junior high school; (3) it is impossible to make decisions on academic advancement in the second year of junior high school; (4) opposition from families to discriminatory education.” (Report from Shizuoka prefecture, listing reasons for opposition to extra classes to prepare for entrance examinations). (EJ 1958: 333).

Thus, as the 1950s progressed, the tendency developed within the teaching profession to voice concern about the consciousness of discrimination among students labeled as being near the bottom of the academic pecking order, to call for moves to eliminate that phenomenon, and to describe education that created a consciousness of discrimination as ‘discriminatory education.’ The perception that problematized organizational structures and practices giving rise to that consciousness of discrimination was the prototype for later thinking on discriminatory education.

#### 2.4 The poor as a minority

However, the teaching profession’s perception of ‘discrimination’ during this period was not entirely divorced from social categories. On the contrary, the 1950s view of discrimination as an educational problem was founded on concern over a very apparent social category: that of poverty.

The inaugural meeting of 1952 included reports like the following about junior high school pupils who did not go on to senior high school:

“As for pupils who do not continue their studies, the main reason is lack of money and time... regarding these pupils’ psychological state, and their living conditions ... they have a sense of inferiority, and generally are not blessed by favorable economic circumstances, which means that they are liable to lose their psychological equanimity even over quite small matters. Thirdly, and this is a very difficult problem, there are many students who quite casually engage in outrageous behavior.” (EJ 1952: 114).

At the same sub-group where the above statement was made, numerous reports included empirical survey data to show that economic factors were the main element preventing pupils from advancing to senior high school. The following passage comes from one of those reports, linking the economically determined division of pupils into

those who could and could not stay in education past junior high school with feelings of inferiority and discrimination.

“Among laboring youths we find all sorts of bad conditions, including the gap between rich and poor. I tell them that it’s no good always having that sense of inferiority, that discriminatory way of thinking, and I aim to create people who will stand tall in any situation, even if they are working as laborers, as free and equal human beings.... The framework created by the old prewar system, with its middle schools, girls’ schools, higher elementary schools and youth schools created various distinctions between classes of people according to their various social and economic environments, but I think we have to get rid of that kind of education.” (EJ 1952: 138).

In those days, the gap between rich and poor was still a very tangible reality. That, of course, is why there were so many reports at the Nikkyōso study meetings about pupils’ socioeconomic environments, extending far enough to include material on their social status origins. In that sense, problematizing the consciousness of discrimination among pupils who did not go on to senior high school amounted to making an issue of ‘unjust’ treatment based on the social category of poverty – ‘discrimination’ in the English sense of the word.

## 2.5. Changing views of ability and meritocratic/discriminatory education

There was, however, a weakness with this simple view of what constituted discriminatory education: it made it all too easy to develop a way of thinking that emotionally shrank from any kind of ranking whatever that could cause feelings of discrimination. I will now look at this issue, mainly by reference to the changing debate on ability grouping.

Going into the 1960s, Nikkyōso developed a position that condemned ability grouping (‘tracking’ in US parlance; ‘streaming’ in the British literature), as a form of meritocratic discrimination. Interestingly, though, until the early 1950s, Nikkyōso had been willing to countenance academic tracking. The union’s position shifted from acceptance to rejection during a period from the late 1950s to the start of the 1960s. Behind that change of position lay a major shift in the union’s perception of ability differentials.

At the 1958 Nikkyōso study meeting, the sub-group on career guidance discussed plans then thought to be afoot at the Ministry of Education to introduce ‘aptitude-based career guidance principles’ (*tekisei tekishoku-shugi*), under which pupils

would be guided towards different careers depending on their intellectual ability. Among the contributions to the debate was this one criticizing the ministry for intellectual essentialism/determinism:

“The idea that intelligence is constitutionally in-born, so that if you carry out intelligence tests you can predict future intelligence with a considerable degree of accuracy, in which sense the tests have value as a sort of preliminary examination – I would describe that idea as pretty dubious. In that sense things like the MOE’s handbook ‘A Ready Reckoner of IQ-based Job Aptitude’ (*IQ ni yoru Tekishoku Hayami-hyō*), that assume that IQ has a constant value, are worthless and harmful because they fix permanent labels of excellence or inferiority on students, denying the possibility of future improvement, and effectively sealing their fate.” (EJ 1958: 321).

“The possibility of future improvement.” The opinion quoted here is based on that view of school students – a view that does not view intelligence as a fixed value and recoils from any labeling of students as excellent or inferior in terms of intelligence. Suspicion about the very use of intelligence as a standard to judge students’ level emerges here as an important debating point in the argument over ability differentials.

The other side of the coin was a view that all students had equal ability – and that by extension, differences in achievement should not be viewed as fixed by innate ability, but as things that could be changed by the effort and determination (*ganbari*) of the pupils. This view can be clearly seen, for example, in this statement by a junior high school teacher at the start of the 1960s:

“All the kids, or at least nearly all of them, essentially have the ability to score 100%, and I believe the fact that they do not means that we cannot say that ‘education,’ in the true sense of the word, is going on.” (*Kyō’iku* journal, May 1962: 28).

By the 1960s this kind of view of intelligence and academic ability had become a powerful position from which to criticize meritocratic education. In 1961, a report pointing to elements in the social environment and individual make-up as factors determining career choice drew a string of hostile responses, including the following:

“On the subject of intelligence and lifestyle, there is a problem with the view that sees poor people as having low intelligence” (Gunma pref.)

“The report sees a vicious cycle between poverty and low intelligence, but we

have to critically question the meaning of intelligence tests.” (Kyoto pref.)

“There’s some kind of hocus-pocus going on with intelligence tests. Since intelligence is not something in-born, it follows that there are elements of social class in intelligence tests.” (Osaka, Kumamoto prefs.)

“Intelligence is not the decisive factor in academic ability.” (Osaka pref.) (EJ 1961: 296).

Furthermore, a report on deliberations at the career guidance sub-group at the 1962 meeting has this to say:

“On the subject of forming ability-based school classes, this meeting heard both the positive view (Okayama pref.) and the negative view (report from Japan Senior High School Teachers Union [*Nikkōkyō*], Hokkaido chapter). One’s impression was that the positive view for introducing such classes took a severe beating, especially from junior high school participants.” (EJ 1962: 253)

As this passage indicates, negative views of ability-differentiated education were widespread in the teaching profession at this time.

## 2.5 Views of Meritocratic/Discriminatory Education and Mass Education Society

Let us now ask ourselves how postwar Japanese education and society changed in response to the acquisition of this perception of education and society. First of all, this kind of egalitarianism inevitably led to leveling out of education, at least in its formal structures – that is to say, it led to an increasingly conformist conception of equality. During the years of compulsory education in particular, it led to an emphasis on using the same educational materials and the same standards of evaluation for all students, to avoid giving students any sense that they were being discriminated against. This was considered more conducive to equality of education than the use of a variety of educational materials and evaluation standards. Standardization of curriculum, evaluation standards and evaluation procedures was promoted, and this in turn led to strengthening the notion of a single ranking system for all pupils. Why? Because applying the same treatment to all students, without isolating any of them from the mainstream, was seen as ‘equal education,’ that would not make anyone feel discriminated against. Bizarrely, this meant that telling a student he was in the bottom 1% of all pupils his age in the whole of Japan was supposed to make him feel good



because he was not being discriminated against by being excluded from the ranking system.

Secondly, the expansion of education based on this kind of egalitarianism became a powerful engine driving the spread of mass meritocracy. The idea, as quoted above, was that anyone could get 100% if they only tried hard enough, irrespective of what sort of circumstances they had been born into. Every kid was supposed to have unlimited academic potential. The denial that ability was innate and determined led to an egalitarian view of ability, and hence to an ideology of effort, stressing that education gave everybody the chance to succeed. And so, ironically enough, while denying any role for competition in education, the argument against meritocratic education ended up playing the role of leading the masses into intense educational competition. That in turn led to an expansion of educational opportunities – of more homogeneous educational opportunities, moreover.

Thirdly, the expansion of education based on this kind of egalitarianism effectively obscured from sight the problem of structural inequality in education, what we call ‘status and education,’ contributing to the establishment of a mass education society. ‘Equal education’ meant education that did not create feelings of discrimination. As such, the very attempt to look at differences in academic ability between status groups was spurned for fear that it could lead to feelings of discrimination among children from lower status groups. True, the simple critique of discriminatory education, which problematized the sense of discrimination among pupils whose poverty stopped them from progressing to higher levels of education, included a perspective on social status and inequality in education as a matter of course. However, that simple critique of discriminatory education had difficulties with the view of ‘inequality’ as a *social* problem, preferring instead to focus on the *emotional* problem of the sense of discrimination stemming from differentials in ability. The result of that was to drive the problem of educational inequality itself into a blind corner, while the view that equated the creation of feelings of discrimination in the educational process with ‘inequality’ came to dominate the debate on inequality problems. Thus was perfected the structure that drew the masses into the battle to acquire academic credentials, without being distracted by the structural inequalities that do in fact arise in any education system.

### 3. Development of Academic Credentialism and Criticism of It

The phenomenon that I called ‘mass meritocracy’ in the previous section was looked upon in Japan as the flourishing of ‘credentialist society’ (*gakureki shakai*). Led on by

Japanese-style egalitarianism, more and more people desired more and more academic credentials and joined in the educational rat-race. In fact, differentials stemming from social status still existed, both in the level of education attained and the scholastic standards achieved. But people paid no attention to such things. Instead they focused on the intensity of competition for admission to elite schools, the scale of advantages in employment and promotion accruing to the graduation diploma of each university, and various educational problems that were viewed as by-products of the credentialist society, such as delinquency, bullying, school drop-outs etc.

### 3.1 The social rebirth of Japanese people

In January 1970, an OECD working party arrived in Japan to study the education system. Its objective was to look for problems in Japanese education and suggest solutions to them. One member of that working party, the Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung, issued the following 'diagnosis' of Japanese education.

“The first thing to be said about this system is that it is essentially driven by an ideology of group association, so that once you are allotted to a particular group, it is extremely difficult to change your class. In this credentialist system, one's biological birth is followed by one's social birth. Taking a peek at that fact, one notices that these two births share the characteristic that one's class affiliation is determined at birth. To put it more accurately, which class one is affiliated to is determined by the entrance examination at each level... to pass an entrance exam is to be reborn; and once a person has been reborn, his status in society will be determined in the same way that a person's status is determined by the circumstances of their biological birth in a 'conservative society.’”

“It is essentially an ascriptive system in the sense that once one is allocated to a group it is very difficult to change one's class. It is like being born into a class, only that in a degreeocracy social birth takes place later than biological birth. More precisely it takes place at the time of the various entrance examinations, and like all births it has its pains. There is the pregnancy period with some element of social isolation (preparation for the exam); the labour (the exam itself) ; and there are miscarriages and infant mortality (the high suicide rates for that particular age group, 20-24, in that particular period of the year. April). It is traumatic and dramatic; and it should be because it is the entrance to real life. Biological birth is dramatic and the social birth of fully conscious individuals even more so.

As mentioned so often in speeches: the entrance examination is to be born again, and once it has happened one's future life. is as predetermined as in any Model I (conservative—by Kariya) society — only more effectively so because the society is more rational, more technically adequate.” (Galtung 1972: 139).

I would say that Galtung got it just about right in his analysis of Japan's credentialist society. Biological birth is indeed followed by social birth; and although obviously the individual has far more control over the latter than the former, once the outcome of entrance exams has determined one's social birth, one's status is determined and continues in much the same way as it is determined by breeding or social class in more traditional societies. Japanese entrance exams can indeed bring changes to a person's life that are dramatic enough to merit the expression 'rebirth.' That is why so many people are concerned about educational credentials, resulting in intensifying competition over entrance exams. We can trace the birth of the myth of credentialist society from the spread of this view represented by Galtung's remarks.

### 3.2 The truth of the 'credentialist society': international comparison

In the world of social research, a 'credentialist society' (*gakureki shakai*) is defined as “a society in which the influence of educational credentials plays a relatively large role in determining its members' social status” (Asō 1991: 27). It follows that it should be possible to measure, fairly objectively, the degree to which that definition applies to a society. International comparative studies indicate that Japan is not necessarily such an intensely credentialist society as to stand out from the crowd.

By and large, it is true of all the so-called 'advanced industrial societies' that one's level of education defines one's social status to a certain degree. That degree does not appear to be spectacularly higher in Japan than in other countries (Ishida 1993). In other words, if we attempt to study the matter objectively, all advanced industrial societies appear to be 'credentialist societies.'

Moreover, if we investigate one stage further, and ask ourselves to what degree traditional social status factors such as parental occupation and parental education influence socioeconomic success among people with the same academic credentials, we do not find that those other factors are any less influential in Japan than elsewhere. Research comparing status mobility in different countries suggests that among people with the same academic credentials, parental birth will influence subsequent acquisition of occupational status in Japan to about the same degree as in Britain and the United

States (Ishida 1993).

Indeed, if we put to one side the matter of people's consciousness and seek to measure social patterns objectively, we find that Japan, Britain and the United States all show aspects of social credentialism. Moreover the power of education to effect 'social rebirth' does not appear to be so much stronger in Japan than in other countries as to dilute the social influence of biological birth. However, no less important than the 'objective truth' is the way people *view and interpret* the realities of education and society. At the very least we can say that in Japanese society up the mid-1980s, the belief that Japan had a more intensely credentialist society than other advanced industrial countries was strong enough to permeate widely through society.

### 3.3 The debate on old-boy networks and ability

In his interesting work on 'the glories and mishaps of the Japanese academic aristocracy' (1999), Yo Takeuchi recounts the following anecdote, which I reproduce here because it suggests that, at least until the mid-1960s, postwar university graduates had the same kind of status consciousness as the pre-war academic aristocracy. The anecdote concerns a passage from the speech made by University of Tokyo president Kazuo Ōkōchi at the 1965 Tōdai graduation ceremony.

"In your working lives you will presumably be treated as elites and embark on high-level career courses. That will be so, irrespective of how much ability or aptitude for your duties you may actually have."

Apparently this last remark prompted an outburst of laughter from the audience. As Takeuchi astutely observes, "Behind their laughter lay their shared assumption that that they would obviously be elites in their working lives" (Takeuchi 1999: 313).

This episode cruelly exposes a well-known and much-criticized problem with the credentialist society. Criticism of the credentialist society has often included condemnation of the high-level careers guaranteed to those with the right credentials. The argument that academic credentials should not be equated with ability, and that the issuance of special privileges to educational elites is tantamount to creating a new caste system, has long pervaded critiques of the credentialist society.

That view has been strengthened by another common criticism of the credentialist society, which denigrates the value to the real world of education focused on passing entrance exams. "If a guy's graduated from Tōdai, that only means he