

Séminaire du groupe Éducation, Enfance-s et Société en
Asie Orientale

Education and Social Inequalities in Contemporary Japan: from Equality of Opportunity to Disparities in Outcomes?

With

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Emeritus Professor of Sociology
of Japanese Society at the
University of Oxford.
Currently a specially appointed
Professor at Sophia University,
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9h30-12h30

Inalco - Maison de la Recherche

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Participation en distanciel possible.

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Éducation et inégalités sociales dans le Japon contemporain : de l'égalité des chances aux disparités de résultats ?

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“The Japanese Interpretation of Educational Inequality: A Sociology of Knowledge on Translated Concepts of 'Class', 'Opportunity', and 'Inequality'”

Abstract

Empirical research findings suggest that Japan has maintained a level of inter-class inequality in social mobility comparable to that of many other advanced societies. Similar analytical results have been presented concerning the relationship between social class and educational attainment. However, the empirical dimension of this problem is distinct from the way the issue is perceived and understood by the society and its people. When we perceive and articulate equality and inequality in education, the specific vocabulary employed is crucial. The characteristics of these words and concepts create differences in how we, as a society, construct the problem of educational inequality.

This presentation focuses on the language used in Japan to discuss equality and inequality—most of which consists of concepts translated from Western languages. For instance, the English term “class” is a critical concept for analysing and discussing inequality. However, an analysis of how this term has been translated and discussed within the Japanese context reveals significant deviations from the original English concept. Similar issues can be pointed out with the terms “opportunity” and “inequality”. By undertaking a historical and sociological analysis of the underlying “knowledge” that frames our understanding of equality and inequality, this presentation will argue why educational inequality has not become a major political and policy issue in Japan.

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“Educational Competition and Status Attainment in Japan Revisited: From School to Work to Happiness?”

Abstract

Since the 1980s, Japan has undergone dramatic demographic, economic and social change, which has had a lasting impact on young people in particular. The lost decade following the burst of the bubble-economy in the early 1990s was accompanied by rising youth unemployment, an erosion of job security and widening inequalities. Japan became soon known as *kakusa shakai* or “gap society”. Young people born in the 1980s and 1990s, who have never experienced the booming Japanese economy, started questioning the traditional path towards “happiness”: It seemed as if the arduous path to one of the high ranked universities did no longer guarantee men well-paid, secure jobs in major companies, whereas significant labor market barriers and gendered family expectations continue to restrict women’s opportunities to pursue men-equivalent careers despite having high educational credentials.

In this talk, I will discuss how and why the sweeping educational reforms that were intended to reduce competition and inequality between students may have not had the anticipated results. Worse still, related problems of bullying, delinquency, truancy, and student suicide resulting from the rigid, uniform school system, its multiple rules and the highly competitive exam culture (and the resulting “exam hell”), as well as the high use of private supplementary lessons (at *juku/yobikô*) have by no means disappeared.

Drawing on recent national panel data for youth in Japan, this paper theoretically and empirically examines the question: What are the challenges youth face on their way to (un)happiness in present Japan? Results are discussed with regards to gender and social inequalities focusing in particular on the ongoing role of private supplementary tutoring for educational competition and inequality formation for the first time also looking into effects of these pathways for life satisfaction in early adult life.