

Changes in Modern Japanese Social and Cultural Currents (7)

The Collapse of the Education System

By Nakano Osamu

1. The Collapse of School Classes

During the last U.S. presidential election campaign, I was quite impressed by President Bill Clinton's inclusion of education reform in his platform. His campaign pledge meant that problems with high school education in the country were grave enough to become a presidential election issue and that the U.S. government had to seriously address them. It has long been said that U.S. politics have become inward-looking. As far as I can judge, President Clinton's education reform proposal was nothing but backward-looking. I could not help but feel that education in the U.S. must have deteriorated to such an extent that a presidential candidate dared to make such a proposal during the campaign. Some Japanese who read about Clinton's reference to education suggested that America's misfortune would fall on us, and predicted that the educational problems in Japan would become as serious as those in the U.S. in 10 years' time. In reality, Japan's education system has become a serious problem much earlier than had been expected.

If we follow the ideals incorporated in the World Human Rights Declaration or the Japanese Constitution strictly and theoretically, we naturally come to the conclusion that people have no right to teach or assess other people. I have long wondered about this question. In other words, if conscience and reason are equally distributed a priori, and free human character exists independently, isn't education needless, and improbable, in the first place? The Chinese character meaning "to teach" implies "to correct something wrong or incorrect

with a whip." It is improbable for people to teach other people with a whip if both are equally endowed with a conscience and with reason. Such action is nothing but a violation of human rights. However, it is a fact that whips are actually being used in education as a form of discipline. It is not surprising that in the course of evolution of modern society, such strict education became open to doubt and its function is being crippled. The U.S. was the first country to reach this stage.

The Asahi Shimbun reported on the front page of the November 15 issue that the Education Ministry recognizes the sharp increase in incidences of disruption of classes by students in elementary school classrooms throughout Japan and has decided to study the situation. The article was accompanied by a report that included examples of how discipline has deteriorated in classrooms. This article was the first in a series which still continues periodically. The Asahi gave a horrendous account of school disorder. Examples included vandalism of school facilities and equipment; students chatting during classes; children at one end of a classroom shouting to classmates at the other end; students wandering around in the classroom during a lesson; students refusing to read the textbook; students, when asked by the teacher to take out their textbooks, asking "Why do we have to?" When the teacher replies "Because this is class time," they respond "No, it isn't." Students walk out of class or skip class together in groups; others refuse to come to school.

Such a situation represents not merely the collapse of discipline in the classroom, but also the

breakdown of the education system. The Asahi's series is subtitled "When classes get watered down," which is good as rhetoric. But actually the situation is much more serious than that reported by the Asahi.

More than 30 years ago, elementary school children started calling their teachers "senko," which means "Hey, you teacher." With the inauguration of the Parents and Teachers Associations in schools after World War II, parents began to consider themselves equal to teachers and began to openly criticize them. They even boycotted teachers. Teachers became nervous about what parents would say and therefore they tried to control parents using the authority invested in the government. Parents, with their children held "hostage" by school, responded by transferring their children to other schools. This was the beginning of "uneducational" developments in education throughout the country. Children began to look at teachers critically as their parents did, with the result that they began to call their teachers "senko." Teachers called "senko" by children are no longer teachers, having lost their authority. Without authority, they can no longer teach.

Needless to say, teachers themselves are to blame, too. There are plenty of stories about teachers who insist that teachers are human and that it is wrong to bring authoritarianism and formalism to education. Wearing a sweat suit when they teach is becoming the norm among elementary school teachers. Teachers want to become a friend to the students. Education cannot exist between friends. Children who deride teachers and teachers who wear a sweat suit in class cannot make their class a venue

for education.

School classes had already begun to break down in the 1960s and the situation has gradually but steadily deteriorated. In the past 30 years the collapse of discipline in the classroom has become obvious to everyone.

After the war, educators insisted that children be nurtured in a "free and easy manner." They urged that a "free and easy" environment be created in the classroom. They also argued that education should be free from pressure and that education should be aimed at nurturing individuality, letting children speak up for themselves as they do in the U.S. But, reflecting on what has happened in schools since the 1960s, we are tempted to think that such ideals as well as the introduction of a five-day school week have only prompted the collapse of classes rather than revitalization of education in the classrooms.

In the 1970s, education critics, social critics and journalists began to criticize the harmful effects of what they called "managed education." They would have attributed the ongoing deterioration of classes to "managed education." But if education had been managed properly, the collapse would never have occurred. In fact, conscientious class management under teachers invested with the appropriate authority has never existed in postwar education in Japan. Any attempt to conduct decent instruction under the current disastrous conditions in schools would only be ridiculed.

What schools did to keep order was to allow teachers of gymnastics to patrol the school buildings with a wooden sword used for fencing and administer corporal punishment. Corporal punishment has continued for more than 30 years and has settled nothing. Was there no way of preventing the collapse of school classes? Education, in the real sense of the word, has long disappeared from the schools. The knowledge standard of students was barely

maintained at a certain level by lessons at coaching and cram schools, which supplemented regular schools. Japanese students' mathematical ability is still higher than their peers in other countries, but education has hardly contributed to the maintenance of their level. Schools only offer preparations for the entrance examinations of the schools providing the next level of education. It goes without saying that the ability to solve problems and successful preparations for examinations for entrance to higher schools can hardly represent the achievement of education as it was originally intended.

2. The Collapse of Schools

Students in the department of the university where I teach all rank among the top 10% in public middle schools. According to their mathematics textbooks, middle school students are supposed to learn quadratic equations in their last year. Yet less than 10% of the students in my department understand and can solve quadratic equations. When I asked them how they managed to enter the university with such low levels of mathematical ability, they answered that they managed it because mathematics merely requires memorization. Their answers show that hardly any students in the final year of middle school really understand quadratic equations. There was no real education for 99% of students at middle schools in quadratic equations. In effect, schools teach nothing, and the students learn nothing, in real terms, about quadratic equations.

The teaching methods may be to blame. Yet, even if teaching methods were considered to be correct (and who can teach correctly?), only about 10% of the students would really be able to understand the subject. It seems reasonable to me that only a few students can possess the abstract thinking ability needed for mathematics, which is extraordinarily

different from a person's usual way of thinking. (Mathematicians would not accept this view, however.) I am not making the statement to emphasize the gaps between human capabilities. I am only saying that human capabilities differ from person to person. This is true not only of mathematics but also of other subjects. Some students are good at the Japanese language and others are not. Some are good at drawing pictures and others like science. Some are extraordinarily interested in social science. Others develop exceptional musical talent. It is inconceivable for one person to possess all these capabilities. Human capabilities differ in this way.

Under the current Japanese educational system, all middle school students are encouraged to advance to high school regardless of the school they attended. In high school, they all study a standardized curriculum as they did in middle school, on the assumption that they will equally achieve the same results. Judging from middle school students' inability to understand quadratic equations, such a system is really crazy. Thus, those who assert that man equally possesses reason and conscience would naturally be proven wrong by reality. It is not surprising that the number of middle and high school students who refuse to go to school is increasing sharply. An Education Ministry survey, carried in the *Asahi Shimbun* on November 14, showed that 30% of elementary school students and 60% of middle and high school students do not understand what they are taught. These figures are the logical results of the deterioration of education in the schools. It is certainly not the result of the introduction of a five-day school week.

In the early 1980s, I had the opportunity to observe a class in session in a Tokyo high school. I was to report on university students' teacher training in the classroom. The school was a lower-level high school, as only about 10% of the

students went on to college. The school principal and other senior teachers, trainees and evaluators, including myself, observed the class. In the classroom, girls slightly outnumbered boys, and rubbish was piled up in the corner as if the room had not been cleaned for months. Most students had soft drink bottles and bags of snacks on their desks. Few listened to the student teacher and several were dozing. Some were talking to each other, while others called out to each other across the room. Some were even playing games and reading comics. Fortunately, nobody dared to leave the class or wander about.

When I was asked to comment on the class later, I uttered in spite of myself, "That cannot be considered a lesson." The school master responded, saying "You're right. There is no education going on here. Students, for their part, have no intention of receiving an education. Schools and teachers just keep students inside the school building for a certain number of hours at the request of the local community (parents). This is all we are doing." The principal may have wanted to make a point about the absence of education, as the situation he described had nothing to do with education. What they are doing daily is certainly not worthy of real educators.

High school education has long been in a sorry state in the U.S., as President Clinton pointed out, with more than half of high school students refusing to attend classes. But a similar phenomenon was already evident in Japan in the 1980s, although the situation was not as bad as in the U.S.

Students do not understand why they have to go to school. Nobody tells them why they have to do so. They are kept in a cage for a certain number of hours without being told why. Teachers, for their part, only guard the cage. Are students and teachers doing something meaningful? If most high schools in

Japan are operating more or less in this fashion, it can be said that students and teachers have, in fact, repeated nothing but a meaningless, purposeless and futile activity every day on a grand scale.

It was against such a background that the notorious gate-crushing accident occurred at a high school in Kobe several years ago. The school had regulations which required the gate to be closed by the time classes began. One morning, a teacher in charge of closing the gate that day closed the gate on a girl student who was trying to get through in time. The girl got caught in the gate and was fatally injured. The girl was not the sole victim. The teacher, who dutifully but foolishly closed the gate, was also the victim. The mass media criticized the educational system, the school, school regulations and the teachers. Legal authorities merely punished the teacher who was responsible for closing the gate that day. The school abolished the gate-closing rule and lifted restrictions on how students should come to and leave school. As a result, students of the school became so undisciplined as to enter and leave the classrooms at will even in the middle of a class.

The absence of education, the failure to maintain standards and anarchy — features which were limited to low-quality schools in the 1980s — have spread to schools all over the country in an obvious way. The mass media, which harshly criticized education and educators in connection with the gate-closing case, hardly report on the recent phenomena, as if they think that an ideal situation has emerged. Whatever critics and journalists may say, the current situation in schools shows education is getting watered down and is in danger of collapsing. Who is to blame?

This makes me wonder why I did not oppose the proposal for having all middle school students advance to high school. In fact, we cannot criticize this ideal spoken of in such beautiful language. Now, I see how

such an ideal has ignored the reality of this situation and human nature. Ignorance of this reality and human nature may be a cause of the deterioration seen in education. But when we pursue the matter in theory, we are supposed to arrive at the conclusion that modernity itself is the culprit.

3. The Collapse of the Education System

It is a well-known fact that Japanese young people are far less willing than their peers around the world to give up their seats to elderly passengers, infirm or handicapped people in trains and buses. The rate of young people giving up their seats is extraordinarily low in Japan, even among advanced countries where individualism is an ideal.

At a party I held for my students in the 1960s, participants exchanged opinions on whether young people should yield seats to the elderly. Not surprisingly, a large number of them said they would be willing to do so, although they said they had reservations. They wondered if the decision to yield seats to the elderly was based on ethics or a social norm. Some said yielding seats to the elderly was hypocritical. One boy said he was tempted to offer his seat to the pretty girl standing in front of him first, rather than to an elderly person. Another said he didn't feel like yielding his seat just because young people are supposed to yield their seats. Others pointed out that some elderly people get angry when they are offered seats because they were insulted to be considered elderly. They should honestly accept the offer, one student said. Another said he was upset when the elderly man to whom he offered his seat said he would get off at the next stop. The students were rather too self-conscious but their arguments were quite to the point. Whatever arguments they may have had, most university students in the 1960s did give up their seats for their elders.

This was the achievement of their broader education.

Japanese young people these days, however, don't feel bad about their unwillingness to yield their seats, which is now notoriously well-known even outside Japan. They scramble for seats on trains. They ignore the elderly people standing in front of them and instead talk about what they bought during their overseas trips. They take it for granted that passengers should get seats on a first-come, first-served basis because they paid their fares. They don't understand why they should yield their seats to elders, and nobody teaches them why. They never think of offering their seats to an elderly person who stands in front of them, even when they occupy the seats reserved for the elderly. They are completely clueless.

It is already more than 10 years since chatting in university classes became a problem. Universities have begun using microphones in classrooms to counter the noise. But the noise level of students' chatting increased accordingly. University teachers find themselves hardpressed to give lectures. They asked the students not to violate the rights of those students who want to listen to lectures, but their plea was lost on the students. The students have no remorse about breaking the rules and feel no social pressure to listen to the lectures. A teacher warned students who were chatting unbearably to shut up, but he was only rebuked and threatened. He was told by one of the students, "You are only a teacher. Don't overestimate yourself. Better take care of yourself on your way home." Such a student was never taught how to behave. His behavior shares the same roots as those youths who do not yield their seats to the elderly.

Incidentally, I want to add a story about a young man who joined a volunteer relief team at the time of the 1995 Great Hanshin Earthquake, without knowing what volunteer work is all about. He did not know that

volunteers offer services free-of-charge, and so was surprised to find out he would not be paid. He wanted to join the group because many other people did and to take advantage of the occasion to show off and assert himself. He didn't join to serve people in need of help. There were many other volunteers like him. Some joined the group because they wanted to appear on TV. Instead of contributing to the relief activities, they just got in the way.

These people never thought of how they are connected with other people in society. They can hardly produce the human bonds and solidarity that are essential in a community. Their behavior is primarily a product of individualism-oriented education which encourages everyone to do what they want and condemns the postponement of enjoyment or gratification.

Since the Meiji Era, university education in Japan has focused on each student's voluntary efforts to study, with assistance from school and teachers. Universities do not attach importance to the assessment of a student's performance. Assessment is left up to the students themselves. This tradition has remained unchanged. Students are left unsupervised. No one says anything even if they do not study. Universities have refrained from intervening on the assumption, or pretext, that humans naturally are forward-looking and have good intentions. Such a rule has something in common with postwar education in elementary, middle and high schools which focuses on giving students leeway and minimizes the responsibilities of management.

Traditional Japanese-style university education was based on the strict selection for admittance of students, difficult studies and strict assessment in middle school and high school. Now, students are left totally unsupervised in universities, as if the latitude granted in elementary schools, middle schools and high schools had not been enough. As a

result, the levels of students' deviation values go up, while their comprehensive academic levels continue to decline. University education has lost its function as a venue for learning how to act in society and the community as well as acquiring knowledge and skills.

The Education Ministry, gravely concerned about the deteriorating situation, has decided to introduce a strict testing and assessment system in university education, while still sticking to its policy of encouraging latitude and relaxation and a five-day school week at lower-level educational institutions. It will be easy to predict that when students used to such latitude are suddenly subjected to strict tests and assessments, they will only develop new techniques for passing their tests. They already have considerable techniques for passing tests, as if they are playing their favorite video games.

There is no longer "education" in a broader sense. Education is distorted or is disappearing. This is what we are now witnessing at university campuses. This situation corresponds to the collapse of the educational system at the elementary and middle school levels. Reform of the university system alone will not be enough. Reform of the whole education system, from elementary and middle schools on up, is essential. But reform will not be achieved without changing the relativity of the standard for goodness, truth and beauty. We have to learn from history to see under which social authority education functioned properly. If such a system cannot exist in the modern world, we might as well eliminate education for the present. **JTI**

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