
A Case Against National Testing as Proposed by America 2000: Japan Since 1979

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Even though Bush has left the White House, he did not leave without a legacy regarding education in the United States. It may well be the appropriate time to take another look at what was implemented by his administration so that perhaps, as educators, we can have a voice in any changes or further decision making. One major area of concern which has surfaced in regard to our schools is that of high-stakes national testing.

America 2000, as proposed by the Bush administration, called for federally influenced national testing. Although not much information was released about the construction of these American Achievement Tests (U.S. Department of Education, 1991), they begin in 1994. There have been a number of articles published concerning this issue. In fact, the November 1991 issue of *Phi Delta Kappan* was dedicated to America 2000 with a special section on national testing.

In his article, Madaus (1991) tells us that we, as professionals have "an ethical, educational, and political obligation to weigh carefully what we know about testing's positive and negative consequences for students" (p. 227). In addition, he states that

without adequate answers [in regard to why we are testing, what we are testing, and whom we are testing, as well as how the results will be used] it is impossible to evaluate effectively the range of potential effects of a national test . . . on education and society generally and on different kinds of students in particular. (p. 227)

Madaus (1991) is clear about a serious concern regarding high-stakes testing. That is, the American Achievement Test program, once initiated, may proceed without any "stops" or "checks" no matter how loudly educators protest. The new testing program may take on a life of its own, regardless of the intentions of the initiators, causing considerable damage.

To date, educators (Darling-Hammond & Lieberman, 1992; Madaus, 1991; and Shepard, 1991) have more than adequately surveyed the negative consequences of standardized testing in terms of academic and educational aspects in the United States. However, because testing has yet to be federally controlled in this country, they could not comment on the downsides of such a centrally controlled system.

The objective of this paper is to lend support to the aforementioned educators by giving examples of what can happen to an educational system and what can happen to a society when high-stakes tests are utilized. The country analyzed is Japan. The focus of the analysis is to expose and discuss negative sociological and school-related effects which have manifested, remained constant, or increased since the implementation in 1979 of the national testing structure.

From the catalogue of disadvantages of high-stakes tests set forth by Madaus (1991) several are discussed below and supported by what has happened over the last decade and what is happening in Japan today. The first three points are grouped together.

Point One: High-stakes examinations tend to encourage attention to material that is covered in the exams.

Point Two: High-stakes tests in the upper grades can have undesirable "backwash" or "trickle-down" effects on classroom and on study in the lower grades.

Point Three: Preparation for high-stakes tests often over-emphasizes rote memorization and cramming by students and drill-and-practice as a teaching method.

Madaus' Points 1, 2, and 3 can be validated by two aspects of the Japanese education structure: (a) the nature of preparation for the tests and (b) the emergence of *juku* or cram schools.

First, because of the preoccupation with upcoming exams, it is not unusual for third year high school teachers to allot most of their time to teaching the test. Due to the construction of the exam, the teacher focuses on presenting facts to be memorized. Thus, rote memorization takes the forefront while other forms of learning are pushed aside. Since a high school's reputation depends on how many students enter

notable universities, an enormous amount of pressure is placed on the administrators as well as teachers. This obsession with university entrance exams passes on to the students. An everyday saying is "Four hours pass, five hours fail," and it means that if a student sleeps more than four hours a night, s/he will most likely fail the examination.

Beauchamp (1982) suggests that an undesirable "backwash" manifests within the Japanese educational structure. Junior high school teachers become absorbed with testing. Junior high school students rarely have time for themselves. Their day is taken up by activities related to passing the university examination. They must compete for the university of their choice (or their parents' choice). In many cases, in order to enter the "right" university, they must first enter the "right" high school. That is, the high school which has sent the most students to that particular university.

Primary schools, too, have difficult entrance examinations. In 1988, 945 boys and 507 girls took the test at Keio Primary School but only 132 entered - 96 boys and 36 girls (*Japan Times*, June 4, 1990). Even kindergartens have competitive tests; one such example is Keio which is also affiliated with Keio University--one of the Tokyo Big Six Universities.

Second, in Japan there has been an emergence of *juku* or cram schools. In an effort to get their children into the right high school or university, most parents send their children to these "after school" schools. These schools prepare students to pass exams at various levels. They also teach the test for particular universities. By getting results, *juku* puts pressure on the public school system to structure the curriculum in ways that reflect the content of the examinations.

In 1986 the Japanese Ministry of Education (OERI, 1987) reported that 30% of all sixth graders were attending *juku*. In *Imidas* (1988) it was stated that 50% of all junior high school children and 17% of primary children were studying there. By 1990 these percentages jumped considerably. It was estimated that 72% of Japanese children in their last year of junior high school went to *juku*. They usually went 2-3 times a week for two hours at a time (*The Economist*, p. 22). Japanese educators are concerned about the exceptional response to *juku* on the part of the parents. In 1986 the Japanese Ministry of Education appointed Mr. Nippori, Chair of the Committee on Children's Outside Activities, to research the harmful effects of *juku* on the process of character building. Mr. Nippori found that *juku* attendance: (a) created stress for parents as well as students by intensifying the worry already felt by them for the forthcoming entrance examinations; (b) made parents and children distrustful of the public school curriculum; and (c) had detrimental physical effects on children (*Imidas*, 1988).

Although the Ministry of Education divorces itself from any involvement with *juku*, it is the government stance itself in regard to the national testing structure which perpetuates the existence of cram schools.

Point Four: Scores on the high-stakes examinations come to be regarded by parents and students as the main, if not sole objective of education.

Performance on the national examination in Japan has become the major focus of education. Considering that over approximately 95% of junior high school students go on to the high schools (*Asahi Evening News*, August 25, 1992), it at first seems odd that only 36.1% of high school students go on to higher education institutions including junior colleges (*Imidas*, 1989). But in light of the competition for limited spaces in well known universities, one can easily recognize how this elitism occurs.

One might wonder why so many students want to enter these prestigious universities. Iga (1986) avers that the obsession is due to the "one-shot" principle prevalent in Japan. Japanese students have little chance of returning to formal education once the process is completed. Therefore, a Japanese person's entire life depends upon his or her success in a sole event (the entrance examination). More than any other single event, the university entrance examinations determine the life course of the Japanese. Their employment depends upon it; their promotions are determined by it; and their status in society is shaped by it.

Because of the societal attitude surrounding these exams and the pressures which ensue, two deleterious effects have become apparent—the *kyoiku mama* and corruption of officials.

The *kyoiku mama* has become a dominating figure over the last decade. Translated loosely this phrase signifies "education mother," but this term does not aptly describe what this mother is like. To begin with, in the main, the Japanese mother views her baby as a part of herself. Whereas the Western mother usually encourages her child to be an individual, the Japanese mother does not recognize psychological boundaries between herself and her child. She wishes to instill in her baby the concept of *amae*, reciprocal obligation and dependence tempered with love. Psychologist George DeVos (cited in Garfinkel, 1983) states that

Japanese are extremely conscious in their child-rearing of a need to satisfy the feeling of dependency developed within an intense mother-child relationship in order to maintain compliance and

obedience. Goodwill must be maintained so that the child willingly undertakes the increasingly heavy requirements and obligations placed upon him in school and at home. (p. 29)

Using *amae* to assure devotion, the Japanese mother insures her future.

Many Japanese mothers are *kyoiku mama*. They send their children to noteworthy kindergartens. They attend all PTA meetings. They push their children to attend *juku* and to pass entrance exams. Because the education mother knows that her status is determined by her child, especially a male child who gets into a renowned institution, she will stop at nothing. Beauchamp (1982) explains:

Such preoccupation with their children's success in education no doubt reflects the typical Japanese mother's lack of opportunity for personal achievement outside her family. Working to ensure her child's success enables her not only to satisfy her duty as a mother but also to achieve position and prestige in the neighborhood and among her friends and acquaintances. It is not unusual at high school graduation ceremonies for mothers, who have worked exceptionally hard to ensure their children's academic success, to be commended by the principal and awarded honorary diplomas. (p. 29)

Although parental involvement in a child's education can certainly be beneficial, in Japan it seems that frequently some parents, especially mothers, pressure their children to the extreme. Dr. Shigeta Saito in an interview with Hamish McDonald (1981) commented that part of the problem with school-related violence is "the 'education mama,' the housewife mother who transfers all her ambitions to her children and pushes them hard through school and *juku*." Saito goes on to say that the mothers need counseling, but each thinks she is the best there is in the world. (p. 57)

From the government report, *White Paper on Youth* (cited in the *Japan Times*, December 26, 1981) came the news that there was much violence in the home. Eighty-eight percent involved in the violent acts were boys, and the shocking news was that 61% of their targets were their mothers. In another report, the Prime Minister's Office surveyed 2,000 students. Forty-four percent said that they felt like using violence against their parents when scolded, urged to study hard, or nagged over personal affairs (*Japan Times*, July 24, 1982).

Two examples below illustrate how students may react to parental badgering:

1980. Nobuya Ichiryu failed to finish at Tokyo University. His father and older brother both graduated from Tokyo, and his father berated Nobuya as stupid. After drinking some whiskey, Nobuya proceeded to bludgeon his parents to death with a baseball bat (McDonald, 1981, p. 57).

1984. A 14-year-old boy murdered not only his parents but also his grandmother. The boy was from a middle-class home. Police stated that he stabbed his victims because he was scolded about his poor performance at school. The boy stabbed his parents and grandmother over 20 times each (Pepper, 1988, p. 15).

Another detrimental aspect of the pressure is corruption among government officials and educators. In the January 1992 edition of the *Asahi Evening News* it was reported that the Minister of Telecommunications, Mr. Watanabe, had accepted two million yen for acting as a middle man for university entrance examinees to help them pass the tests. It was revealed that the Minister had been accepting money over the last ten years. Also in July of 1991, three former employees of Meiji University were arrested on charges of arranging for surrogates to take entrance examinations for university applicants. Coach Mitsuzawa was accused of accepting \$250,000 to find test takers (Regur, 1991, p. A34).

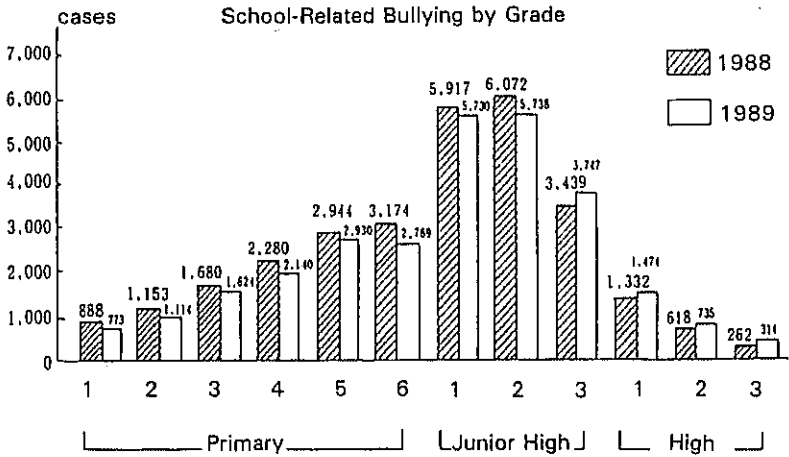
Point Five: High-stakes tests can force students to leave school before they have to take the examination--or after failing it.

Children who do not go to school for 50 days continuously are known as "school refusers." This kind of absenteeism reached a 30-year high in 1985. By 1986 the number had almost doubled and in 1987 the total number of school refusers numbered 5,300 in primary schools and 33,000 in junior high schools. In 1989 this number increased to over 47,000 (*Annual statistics report, 1991-1992*). The Ministry of Education has commented that the main reason given for school refusal is the rigor of the national curriculum. Other students stay away to avoid excessive bullying. Junior high school age students have the highest rate of absenteeism, and it is intriguing that this age student is the most frequently bullied (see Figure 1).

The Guidebook for the Prevention of Child Suicide (1985) published by the Japanese Office of the Prime Minister makes this observation about school attendance

... under today's administrative education system, a school is not an enjoyable place anymore for children and is a very painful place for some of them. This phenomenon, that children think of school as a painful place, seems to exist only in Japan. (p. 14)

Figure 1



Source: *Children's white paper: 1991 Protect the child.* (1991). Tanabe, Toru (ed.). Tokyo: Soda Bunka Company, p. 207.

Point Six: National tests are not suitable for all students and can be extremely stressful for some.

The educational pressures in Japan overwhelm some students and the effects of this stress are frightening. The major consequence of the situation is a dramatic increase of violence among school-age children and teens. In a country that once revered the school and idolized teachers, more violence exists between students and against teachers.

The Japanese Ministry of Education (cited in the *Japan Times*, November 9, 1985) recorded that in 1984 the greatest increase in school violence was that of bullying. The figure represented an increase of 23% over that of 1983. By 1985, 68.8% of the junior high schools had reported incidents of violent bullying; the Ministry of Education had 155,066 incidences of bullying to contend with (*Japan Times*, March 8, 1986).

Below are examples of student against student bullying which have occurred over the years and been reported in the *Japan Times*. These selected incidences will give the reader an idea of the types of bullying taking place.

February 1983. Kisarazu City. Chiba Prefecture. Four 8th grade girls were subjected to group violence for three hours by other girl students.

April 8, 1983. Tajimi. Gifu. Police arrested five students in connection with the killing of a new student of Chukyo High School. Keishin Takeda, 15 years old, was beaten for two hours in the dormi-

tory. His assailants, 16 and 17 year old, used a metal baseball bat and a wooden sword. School officials failed to notice the beating as it occurred on a Sunday evening.

November 1984. Osaka. Two high school students killed a classmate who had tyrannized them. They hit him repeatedly on the head with a hammer; then they threw his body into the river.

October 22, 1985. Fujimi. Gunam Prefecture. A 14-year-old boy ingested poison because of being bullied. An 8th grader, he had been harassed by classmates who punched and kicked him earlier in October. He left a suicide note which was found in his school bag which said that he resented his schoolmates for bullying him.

Student violence against teachers has also escalated. Incidence of violence directed at teachers numbered 605 from January through June 1980 according to the National Police Agency (*Japan Times*, December 27, 1980). That year showed a 69.8% increase over the previous year (note: the governmentally controlled university entrance exams were implemented in 1979). Violence against teachers at junior high schools showed a particularly dramatic rate of increase--a 76.3% jump.

Again, the excerpts from the *Japan Times* should give the reader an idea of what Japanese teachers are encountering:

October 27, 1980. Owase. Mie Prefecture. A group of junior high school students ganged up on 10 teachers.

November 12, 1980. Minimi Ashigara. Kanagawa Prefecture. Police arrested three 9th grade boys in connection with an attack on six teachers.

January 1983. Tokyo. Mr. Yagi was attacked and injured by a student with a knife. Fellow teachers said they were helpless and could not do anything when they saw him being bullied by students.

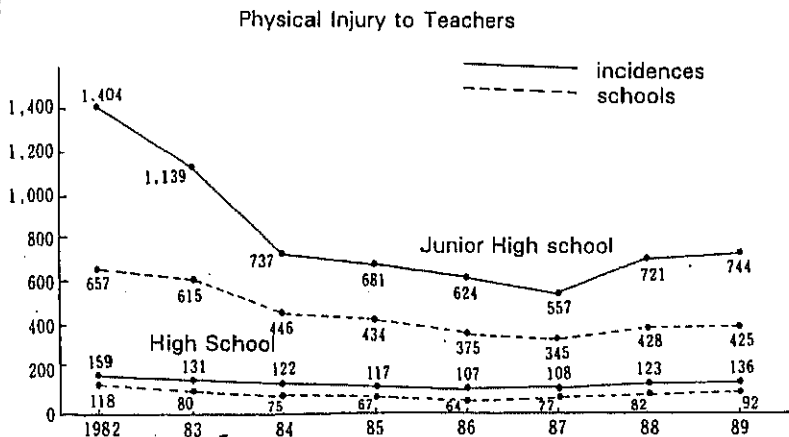
February 1983. Twenty teachers were victimized at school. Seven of them were women.

March 23, 1988. Shinjuku. Tokyo. A 16-year-old male was arrested for the stabbing death of Jun Ozawa, his teacher. Ozawa who worked at Yotsuya Daichi Junior High School was lying in a pool of blood in front of the student's home. The student apparently had asked the teacher over and stabbed him repeatedly with a kitchen knife.

June 1990. Takaishi City. Osaka. Violence against teachers continue to escalate at Konan Junior High School. Due to mounting violence the principal has resigned from office four years ahead of scheduled retirement.

One in every three junior and senior high school students feels like using violence against teachers according to the survey by the Prime Minister's Office (cited in *Japan Times*, July 24, 1982). Some 51% cited teacher favoritism as the reason for the hostility. Other reasons mentioned were persistent scolding and teachers' indecision. It is of interest to note that in 1983, 97.7% of the attacks on teachers were committed by 14-15 year olds (*Japan Times*, March 5, 1983) and that 60% of the acts occurred during classroom hours (*Japan Times*, September 24, 1983). Please refer to Figure 2 for numbers regarding physical injury of teachers.

Figure 2



Source: *Children's white paper: 1991 Protect the child*. (1991).
 Tanabe, Toru (ed.). Tokyo: Soda Bunka Company, p. 207.

Who are these bullies? Though no studies have surfaced in regard to this question, I would suggest that many are the *ochikobore*, "those who fell to the bottom" or "those who fell through the cracks." These are children who cannot perform and are victims of a demanding curriculum. Contrary to what is publicly said about the academic performance of Japanese children, from a survey conducted by the Prime Minister's Office (1982), it was shown that only 26% of all Japanese students fully understood what they are being taught (*Japan Times*, December 14, 1982). With a student teacher ratio of 1:40, remedial attention is rarely given in the public school framework and children who are unable to keep up suffer. Since a school's name is made by the number of graduates who pass the entrance exams, teachers target those students who have a good chance of passing the tests. Other students are all but forgotten.

The *ochikobore* are the students who find they cannot possibly meet the test requirements. They are children who find a school system directed primarily at passing the academically gifted apathetic to their needs. According to the *White Paper on Youth* (cited in the *Annual statistics report*, 1991) a growing problem symbolizing today's Japan is that of "spiritlessness." The *ochikobore* are truly the children of the educational underclass (a term coined by Torsten Husen) of Japan.

Point Seven: High-stakes examinations can negatively affect such personality characteristics as self-concept and self-esteem.

There have been articles written by Westerners that brush aside the issue of child and teen suicide as if these suicides are rarely related to the educational structure/testing system (OERI Japan Study Team, 1987; Sheridan, 1987; and White, 1985). When reviewing what the Japanese themselves have disclosed on this subject, a completely different view materializes. Saito (cited in McDonald, 1981) addresses this problem.

In Western countries suicides increase gradually with age, while in Japan we have two peaks: one among young people, and the other among old people. The suicide peak is getting younger. And if you exclude mental disease, this examination hell is one of the biggest causes. (p. 57)

How can these educators separate the entrance exam from the educational process? Japanese children spend their short childhoods studying for these tests. Their mothers are constantly reminding them to study diligently so that they will perform well on the examinations. Their teachers are incessant in drill and preparation.

Consider this case history:

Owase, Mie Prefecture. A junior high school girl died in a hospital here February 23 after she attempted a suicide apparently to escape bullying by her classmates in school. This girl is identified as Kimiho Sano, 13, first year student of Owase J.H.S. . . . According to police accounts, Sano found his daughter hanging from the ceiling of her room of their house at about 11:30 a.m. February 22. . . . The school authorities and some of the students of her school said that a group of Kimiho's female classmates started calling her "filthy" at the beginning of last September and treating her as an outsider. Consequently, Kimiho often did not report to school and she was absent from school for more than one third of the second quarter last year. Even when she went to school, Kimiho often complained of a headache and stayed at the school health office. Kimiho's parents consulted with her teacher Toshiaki Shimo, 25, about the bullying,

and the teacher had been working to eliminate the tormenting problem in his class. Kimiho's mother, Tsuyako, 51, told police that she had hit her daughter several times with the broom on the morning of February 22, urging her to go to school. While Mrs. Sano began preparing a meal downstairs, Kimiho hanged herself on the second floor (*Japan Times*, March 8, 1986).

The National Police Agency (cited in the *Japan Times*, June 27, 1981) gave three leading reasons for juvenile suicides: (a) scoldings from parents and teachers; (b) inability to keep up with schoolwork; and (c) problems with friends/opposite sex. These reasons tie in very closely with what the *Guidebook for the Prevention of Child Suicide* (1985) gives as the major motives for student suicide in lower age children: (a) being scolded by teachers; (b) being scolded by parents; (c) being bullied; and (d) receiving bad scores on tests. The number one reason that elementary and junior high school children take their own lives is school-related. This includes pressure to study, pressure to enter a good school, and school friendships. In interviews with children who planned to commit suicide or attempted suicide, it was found that this type child is honest, earnest, and sensitive. They excelled in their courses but overworked themselves to win their parents' approval. Because these children are psychologically immature, they despair when they are scolded or betrayed. Though adults may not understand why these children cannot bear these difficulties, the guidebook suggests that understanding is most crucial to eliminating the powerlessness these students feel.

Perhaps Americans believe that Japan is completely different from the United States and that devastating effects such as these could never occur here. It is imperative that educators and professionals in all areas consider Madaus' criticisms and suggestions carefully. Further, it is extremely crucial to be particularly mindful of his comment that the new testing program may take on a life of its own. In light of the information presented, this seems to be what happened in Japan. The U.S. educational system could suffer similar kinds of detrimental sociological effects if American educators do not critically review The American Achievement Tests.

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