

Perceived dearth of freedom in Japan's schools reflects wider woes

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Dressing the part: Parents of students entering elementary school in Japan are often required to follow strict regulations regarding their children's uniform. | KYODO

What a strange place a school is — a world within a world, a society within a society. Kids grow up in it asking themselves, “Is the *real* world like this?”

Yes and no. It is and it isn't.

In December, the weekly Aera published the results of an online survey asking parents and teachers, “Are schools, from the children's point of

view, not free?" Yes, said 93.3 percent of 6,821 respondents.

How free should schools be, given the special nature of their mission? It's a free society the children will enter upon maturity. It's also a disciplined society. Freedom and discipline both make demands on education, but the overwhelming disapproval — almost disgust — that Aera elicits conveys such dissatisfaction and frustration that readers can't help wondering: If parents and teachers feel this way, how must the kids be squirming under rules that demand obedience — not for any rational end they serve but simply because obedience is deemed a virtue?

The mother of a first-grader describes her shock, on entering her daughter's classroom on parents' day at lunchtime, to hear — nothing. Silence. Why? It's the rule, she was told. Children talking dawdle over their meal. Yes, but enforced silence at mealtime is morbid. Well, anyway, that's the rule.

A junior high school teacher in his 30s ruefully counts among his extra-curricular responsibilities that of inspecting the outdoor footwear students leave in the shoe cupboard before donning indoor shoes and proceeding to class. What's the point? It's part of taking attendance. Isn't roll call enough? No. Why? Well — it's not, that's all. It's always been done this way. If it's absurd, it's absurdity sanctioned by time. Does time sanction absurdity? Who has time to consider such questions?

Japanese teachers are said to be the busiest in the developed world. Fourteen-hour days are not unusual. Teachers not teaching are preparing lessons, or doing office work, or enforcing meaningless rules, or supervising extra-curricular sports or craft clubs, or supervising lunch, or placating ever-more-demanding parents who feel their children are being overlooked, or undermarked, or under-recognized for latent genius, or something. More children in recent years come from broken homes or abusive families. This can involve teachers in social problems that are — says one teacher to Aera — beyond their competence. They are teachers,

not social workers. Then of course there's the hoary old problem of bullying, technologically magnified by the virtual powers at every student's fingertips. A teacher who consulted police about an online slander campaign against one of his students was given short shrift. Insults are not a crime. Threats, yes; not insults. Insults are a moral issue, not a legal one.

In an age of expanding diversity, Aera finds, schools remain wedded to uniformity — down to the color of students' underwear, fumes one parent. The mother of an elementary school girl works at a day care center where, she feels, kids are free in ways her child is not. She explains: “When (a preschooler) is cold, I say, ‘Put on a sweater.’ If an item of clothing gets dirty I say, ‘Change into something else.’ Then the kids move on to elementary school, and suddenly they're not allowed to use their own judgment about anything. Everyone has to be the same as everyone else. Maybe it's easier for teachers and students if nobody has to think, but it seems to me there's more loss than gain.”

Teachers, if not students — probably students, too — are too busy to think. In terms of working hours, 30 percent of elementary school teachers and 60 percent of junior high school teachers are “past the *karōshi* line,” according to an education ministry report Aera cites. “*Karōshi*” means death due to overwork. The “line” beyond which that becomes an officially acknowledged danger is 80 hours a week. Stress builds. It must be vented on somebody. “Power harassment,” a familiar affliction of the adult or “real” world, haunts schools too, driving some students, Aera says, into chronic absenteeism.

Life's a pressure cooker, a jungle — choose your time-honored metaphor. Power harassment we get from our jungle forebears, the apes, writes neurologist Nobuko Nakano in the bimonthly *Sapio* (November-December). Male apes have their power displays, we have ours. Ours are more complex, more nuanced. We don't beat our breasts; instead we “dress for success,” bully our subordinates, drive ourselves to exhaustion chasing

quantifiable results to brandish as symbols of having “arrived” — where? That’s another question. But today’s young people are different, Nakano says.

A kind of apathy has set in, she finds, that sets the current young generation apart from those of the high-growth and bubble periods, circa 1960-90. Then the goal was clear — growth; and the path to it sure — hard work. Today — what are we striving for? Doubts outweigh certainties. Will my company still exist 10 or 20 years from now? Will my job, my occupation? Will artificial intelligence elbow me aside? “Young people must seem spiritless to their bosses,” Nakano reflects. Shaped by different times, they nourish different ambitions, pursue different status symbols. Yesterday’s goals were promotion, performance, luxury. Today’s, she says, are more likely to be “likes” and “followers” on social media.

There’s another uncertainty weighing on the young: the old. In a separate Sapio article, novelist and essayist Akira Tachibana compares the swelling ranks of Japan’s elderly to the needy foreign refugees and migrants straining Europe’s liberal tolerance. Will the social welfare costs implicit in Japan’s historically unprecedented demographic — more and more elderly increasingly dependent on fewer and fewer young — shred the latter’s post-retirement safety net? Whether or not they end up doing so, the fear that they will is corrosive to morale. The steadily declining birthrate is both symptom and symbol.

So Japan, as Tachibana would have it, is a “refugee” society in spite of itself, its “refugees,” unlike Europe’s, native born and home grown. “Of course,” he writes, “Japan is not on the verge of collapse, like Zimbabwe or Venezuela. ... Still, with more and more people living past age 100, there’s no guaranteeing that people now in their 20s, still less generations unborn, will enjoy a secure and prosperous old age.”

In school or beyond school, one way or another — rules here, economic and demographic pressures there — freedom fights for survival, its ultimate

victory by no means certain.

Big in Japan is a weekly column that focuses on issues being discussed by domestic media organizations.