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School To Work Transition in Japan:

An Ethnographic Study

A thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree

of Ph.D. (Doctor of Philosophy)
in Education
at Massey University

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1991

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ABSTRACT

The study examines the school to work transition at two Japanese vocationally oriented senior high schools. It focuses on the process of differentiation among non-university bound students making employment-related decisions and obtaining jobs. The ethnographic data collected over one year show that these students create their own trajectories by activating school-based and family-based resources. The thesis argues that the variation within the modal trajectory of this group is due to different perceptions and uses of different categories of these available resources. School resources are extensively made available to all students; they take the form of educational, social, symbolic and cultural resources provided under the job referral practice, which offers a wide-range of employment-related activities and information based on the schools' accumulated data about companies and their ex-students.

Differences in the use of school resources in the transition process can be observed at three levels. Firstly, available resources exist in an "objective" sense both in the family and at school. Secondly, habitus generates a selective perception of the available resources, and some students do not perceive that the resources will help them. Thirdly, habitus activates the resources in a particular way: based on their perceptions, students adjust their wishes to what they see as probable, and some consequently conduct "self-elimination" from seeking positions which they consider they cannot obtain. In this process influential people around students, both in the family and at school, can provide directed resources for immediate personal use; they can intervene in the students' perception and activation of resources and consequently can have an important impact on the final outcome. As a product of one's past experiences and material conditions, habitus acts as a carrier of social inequality and contributes to the reproduction of that inequality. Only school-based resources has any potential to counterbalance the trend towards reproduction in the transition process.

The thesis argues that students who hold positive family resources, like the elites in Bourdieu's study, try to convert these resources into a job which will in turn generate positive social and economic resources. Students without positive family resources, or those with negative family resources have to adopt a different strategy: namely, to convert a combination of the school-based resources into a job for their "life-after-school" by appropriating *shared* resources for their own *individual, private* use. For these students, the school-based resource substitutes for family resources. Hence, although the major differentiation takes place across institutions at the age of 16, the highly organised job referral practice at vocationally oriented high schools, rather than the school system as a whole, softens the determinism of reproduction *within* the non-elite school and job hierarchy. The practice provides an insight into the way the determining relationship between family background and job placement can be loosened. The extensive provision of school-based resources illuminates the process of, and extends the possibilities for, utilising school resources for obtaining jobs.

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GLOSSARY

3CA (or 3CB, 3CC): Third year Commerce course home room class A (or B, C) at Sasaki High.

3D: Third year Data-processing home room class at Sasaki High.

3I: Third year Interior Furnishing home room class at Imai Tech High.

3LA (or 3LB, 3LC, 3LD): Third year academic (Liberal Arts) course home room class A (or B, C, D) at Sasaki High.

3MA (or 3MB, 3MC): Third year Machinery home room class A (or B, C) at Imai Tech High.

academic high school: A senior high school which offers only a general (i.e., academic) course.

Ainu: A native tribe who live in the Hokkaido Island of Japan.

amaeru: Yielding to temptation of ease or pleasure.

arubaito: Casual part-time work.

Australasia: Australia and New Zealand

boshi-katei: Solo-mother family.

buana-shikou: An inclination to choose a safer path.

buraku: The *buraku* people are descendants of an outcaste population. Although the institutionalised caste system was abolished in the mid-19th century, the *buraku* people have remained and still face discrimination. Saki-city where the two schools were located has over 40 *buraku* communities. See the following for details: De Vos, G. and Wagatsuma, H. (1966). Japan's Invisible Race: Caste in culture and personality. Berkeley, University of California Press. Ogbu, J. (1978). *The Buraku Outcastes of Japan*. In Ogbu, J. (Ed.) Minority Education and Caste (pp307-320). New York, Academic Press.

class rep: Class representatives (*gakkyuu-iin*) are elected in each home room class, and are in charge of conveying messages and organising activities.

comprehensive high school: A senior high school which offers both general and vocational courses.

daisotsu: University graduates.

DGLAS: Department of Guidance for Life After School the role of which is to guide and advise students seeking employment or further education.

Douyuukai: The name of a nation-wide association of medium to small size companies.

education board: Local government body which administers schools in a given area. Prefectural education boards administer only senior high schools, while municipal boards are responsible for primary, junior high and senior high schools.

enko: Its literal meaning is "connection". When used in the context of job acquisition where employment is gained through some kind of personal connection, such as a family member or relative. *Enko* can be an alternative to going through school channels to find a job.

furiitaa: A short form of *furii-abubaitaa*.

furii-arubaitaa: Those who derive their main income from casual part-time work and who do not hold a permanent job.

futsuu-kyouka: "Academic subjects" (as opposed to "specialised subjects") like Maths, English, History, etc.

gaiseki: A short form of *gaikokuseki*. The term is used at school to refer to Korean and Chinese resident in Japan, most of whom are second generation. The literal meaning is "foreign national", but the term is not used in reference to Europeans residing in Japan.

gakugyou-fushin: Poor academic performance and low motivation.

gakunen: A group of home room teachers in charge of the same year. It comprises home room teachers, the dean and the sub-dean(s) of each grade.

gakurekishakai: A society based on academic achievement. Japanese society is characterised as such.

general course: Senior high school course based on academic curriculum.

gijutsu-shoku: Technical employment positions. (as opposed to *ginou-shoku* and *senmon-shoku*).

ginou-shoku: Skilled and semi-skilled employment positions. (as opposed to *gijutsu-shoku* and *senmon-shoku*).

habitus: It is an acquired system of generative schema which engenders perceptions, thoughts, expressions and actions (Bourdieu, 1977, p.72,85,95), and is a product of an individual's past experiences and their material conditions (Ibid., p.72). Habitus includes transportable dispositions such as way of thinking, values, and patterns of interpretation.

HOD: Head of department.

home room class: The class unit at school. It is the equivalent of the New Zealand form class, but exhibits greater solidarity.

home room teacher: The teacher in charge of each home room class.

ijime: Bullying.

ikigai: One's aim in life, reason for being.

judaku-sho: A formal letter of acceptance of employment.

kanji: Chinese characters.

keigo: Japanese honorific language. Adults are required to be proficient in *keigo* as its use facilitates social interaction in Japan.

kesson-katei: "Broken family"; single parent or non-parent family.

kinshin: Suspension from school for a fixed period as a punishment.

kousotsu: Senior high school graduates.

maruhi: Confidential.

meishi: Business name cards.

negative resources: Negative resources refer to resources which have a detrimental effect in obtaining "better" employment in the employment market as defined by the dominant group and consequently in improving one's social position. Negative resources refer to resources which adversely affect a person promoting his/her social position given a specific purpose in a specific setting. Also see "resources".

nemawashi: Groundwork which one conducts before an event so that the event will go smoothly, like lobbying.

nengajou: New Year's cards.

neutral resources: Neutral resources have neither a facilitative nor detrimental effect on a person obtaining "better" employment in the employment market as defined by the dominant group. Neutral resources are resources which work neither positively nor negatively for a person promoting his/her social position for a specific purpose in a specific setting.

PESO: The Public Employment Security Office.

positive resources: Positive resources refer to resources which help a person obtain "better" employment in the employment market as defined by the dominant group and consequently improve his/her social position. Positive resources refer to resources which help a person promoting his/her social position given a specific purpose in a specific setting. Also see "resources".

raku: Comfortable and easy.

RC(s): Recruitment card(s).

reijou: A thank you letter.

resources: Possession of tangibles and intangibles of any description. There are four types: economic resources (money and material assets, etc.), social resources (social and personal network, etc.), symbolic resources (prestige and reputation, etc.) and cultural resources (language patterns, taste, consumption patterns, educational achievement, etc.). A particular resource can qualify as a positive resource, a negative resource, or a neutral resource, given a specific purpose in a specific setting.

rounin: Those who failed to gain entrance to a university and spend an extra year (or more) preparing for the following year's entrance examination.

sake: Rice wine.

-san: Used after a name when addressing a person of either sex, like Okano-san. This equates to Mr, Ms, Miss, Mrs in English).

seken-no-me: Its literal meaning is "the society's eye", and is used to refer to social pressure.

senmon-kyouka: "Specialised subjects". Non-academic (vocational) subjects such as machinery, data-processing etc.

senmon-shoku: Professional employment positions. (as opposed to *gijutsu-shoku* and *ginou-shoku*).

senmongakkou: Post-secondary private professional schools which offer "practical" vocational-type courses such as tourism, computer programming, English conversation etc.

-sensei: An honorific suffix used when addressing one's teacher and those engaged in teaching, (eg. *Okano-sensei*).

shakai-jin: The literal translation is "society person". It means a responsible member of society, who has a job and income. Students are not *shakai-jin*.

shindoi: Demanding.

shitamachi: An old quarter of an urban city where small houses and shops are crammed together and which exhibits a strong sense of social solidarity.

shoku-shu: The kind of job which covers *senmon-shoku*, *gijutsu-shoku*, *ginou-shoku*, sales positions, etc. However, the distinctions are blurred.

specialised subjects (*senmon kyouka*): Subjects which are offered in vocational courses, such as electronics, machinery, interior design etc, as opposed to pure academic subjects.

student council: Student body consisting of about 10 elected members.

suisen-nyuugaku: *Suisen-nyuugaku* refers to the practice whereby students sit a special university entrance examination held about three months prior to the open competition examinations. Candidates need to be specifically recommended by their headmaster and therefore must have a reasonable academic record. It is generally acknowledged, however, that the *suisen-nyuugaku* examination are less difficult than those held during the open competition phase.

taigaku(-sha): (those who) leave school before completing a diploma and without graduating. Early school leavers.

teigaku: Suspension from school.

the three-party meeting: An official meeting organised by the school in which the student, his/her parents and the home room teacher discuss the student's school life and, in particular, his/her life-after-school plan. Both Imai Tech High and Sasaki High conduct these meetings in June of a students' final year. In addition, Imai Tech High conducts a further series of meetings in mid August for those who require further consultation. Parent's attendance is almost 100 %.

vocational course: A senior high school course which includes a vocational curriculum (referred to as "specialised curriculum") which represents from 1/3 to 1/2 of the total number of subjects in the course.

vocational high school: A senior high school which offers only vocational courses.

zainichi: Foreign nationals living in Japan, primarily Koreans and Chinese.

zangyo: Overtime work.

INTRODUCTION

The central focus of this study is to chart the differentiation among students at the moment of school to work transition in two vocationally oriented high schools in Japan. Those students who enter the workforce immediately after completing high school become the "mass" of contemporary Japanese society. They are not, however, a uniform group. In this crucial transition period, these students create a variety of personal trajectories by activating school and family resources.

This study examines the process by which these students make decisions about and obtain employment through a state institutional arrangement called "the job referral system". The job referral system is operated by three parties: the school, employers and the Public Employment Security Office (a government agency). Simply put, schools receive recruitment cards for available positions from employers, process this employment data and then make it available to the students, thus providing job opportunities equally to all students regardless of their family backgrounds. The majority of students get jobs through this school channel, although a small number of them use family social networks.

The Statement of the Problem

The thesis argues that those students with family resources obtained jobs through family social networks and did not need to use the school's social network with companies; those without positive family resources depended on the school's institutionalised social network with companies to get jobs; those with negative family resources, such as a minority background, were provided with extra school resources to compensate for their disadvantage. Among those in the first group who used family resources, the majority obtained "desirable" jobs at big companies. A few of them, however, overvalued their family resource, and consequently limited their opportunity to advance their social position. Of the students in the second group, who used school resources, some made the maximum use of the given school resources for obtaining employment, while others activated them less effectively. Among those in the third group, with negative family resources, many exploited the school's provision of resources for their benefit. In short, differences were observed in the way in which school resources were utilised by the students according to their individual circumstances.

What was taking place in the above-mentioned process was conversion of resources from one form to another, and from one generation to the next. The conversion centred on the participants' strategy to estimate the value, and the volume, of different kinds of resources. Failure to estimate them correctly often led to ineffective, or even detrimental use of resources. Bourdieu (1984, p.135-137) presented the capital reconversion strategies among the elites: one converts a form of one's own capital into another form in order to maintain and promote one's social position. This strategy is possible only for those who possess legitimate capital (i.e., positive resources). Those who do not possess positive resources in the first place, like many of the students in my study, are not able to