Current debate on shifting the academic year from April-start to September-start in the Japanese School System

今日の日本の学校制度における 9 月入学に関する議論

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Abstract

The coronavirus infection outbreak was first confirmed to have spread to Japan in January 2020. Similarly to other nations, the Japanese government introduced various measures to prevent and mitigate transmission. In March 2020, the government effectively closed all elementary, junior high, high schools and universities in Japan and worked to hasten the introduction of distant learning. The school closure continued into the new academic year which begins in April in Japan. At this time, the mass media began reporting on the prospect of moving the start date of the school-year permanently from April to September. Though the primary objective is to align with the international standard, it could also serve as an opportunity to make a foundational change to the nation's school system. Though the government has long spoken of changing the start date of the school year, local governments, educators, and parents were perplexed by the sudden development of a thought that could drastically adjust how the nation learns, lives and works. The main purpose of this article is to outline the recent debate over the introduction of September admission, which emerged due to the pandemic-induced school closures, and to clarify its problems.

要 旨

2020 年 1 月、コロナウイルスの日本への感染拡大が初めて確認された。諸外国と同様に、日本政府も感染の予防と軽減のために様々な対策

を検討・導入してきた。同年 3 月、政府は国内のすべての小・中・高・大学を臨時閉鎖し、遠隔教育の緊急的な導入を行った。それを機に主要なマスメディアを中心に、4 月から 9 月への学年開始時期の変更の検討の必要性について報道され始めた。「国際標準に合わせる」ことを第一の目的として、政府は以前から学年開始時期の変更について議論してきたが、国民の学び方、生活、働き方を大きく変える可能性のある政策が現実味を増してきたことによって、地方自治体、教育関係者、保護者の間に混乱が生じた。本稿はパンデミックによる学校閉鎖をきっかけに浮上した 9 月入学の導入をめぐる最近の議論を概観し、その問題点を明らかにすることを主たる目的としている。

キーワード：コロナ感染拡大、学年歴、9 月入学、国際水準、経済への影響、教員不足

Corona pandemic, academic year, September enrolment, global standards, impact on economy, teacher shortages

Introduction

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introduced various measures to prevent and mitigate transmission. In March 2020, the government effectively closed all elementary, junior high, high schools and universities in Japan and worked to hasten the introduction of distant learning. The school closure continued into the new academic year which begins in April in Japan. At this time, the mass media began reporting on the prospect of moving the start date of the school-year permanently from April to September. Though the primary objective is to align with the international standard, it could also serve as an opportunity to make a foundational change to the nation's school system. Though the government has long spoken of changing the start date of the school year, local governments, educators, and parents were perplexed by the sudden development of a thought that could drastically adjust how the nation learns, lives and works. The main purpose of this article is to outline the recent debate over the introduction of September admission, which emerged due to the pandemic-induced school closures, and to clarify its problems.

Background to the current debate

On 27th February, at the newly established Novel Coronavirus Infectious Diseases Control Headquarters, the LDP government suddenly asked all elementary, junior high and high schools to temporarily close, starting on the 2nd March, as the government tried to prevent the spread of the new coronavirus. In April, although not lawfully authorized, the government pronounced a state of emergency in all 47 prefectures and requested that citizens remain and work at home until the end of May, causing a long break in schooling.

The Japanese school year ends in March, and the new year starts at the beginning of April at almost all schools at all levels. School activities such as graduate ceremonies, entrance ceremonies, school excursions and club activities were cancelled or postponed due to the suspension of school. The government did not make any provision for universities, and nursery schools were explicitly exempt from the nationwide closure request by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare.

During the closure, schools needed to accumulate data on medical issue of students from their families and report to the local education board if they discover

any issues. Abe planned to accelerate the introduction of remote education. Worried about a decrease in children's scholastic capacities, the government accelerated its goal of making a tablet computer, or equivalent, accessible to each public student to improve the home learning environment. School closure encouraged employers to make flexible arrangements, as employees with children had to change their timetables or the style in which they work. Abe insisted that businesses be accommodating, for example by allowing parents take time off.

It is in this emergency context of an extended school closure and business disruption that the existing debate on shifting the start of the school year by 4-5 months combined with proposals searching for a solution to the problem of the few months gap in children's schooling. (The gap eventually turned out to be 2-3 months, though this was unknown at the time).

The renewed debate was brought back to the fore in reference to a Twitter post dated April 1, reading

> 'Protect their school life by starting the semester in September. The significance of school has numerous aspects, such as building connections with new people and doing extracurricular activities, let alone studying.'

At this point, it seemed that the quantity of classroom hours set out by the School Education Law could be met by shortening the summer vacation and cancelling events like sports festivals and field trips. The Tweets advocating the shift in the academic year start date, however, attracted over 100,000 "likes", and 80 to 90% responses said that they concurred at that point. If the current classroom hours were met in a shorter space of time, students would need to graduate the following March without having the option to appreciate school life fully – the original tweet refers to 'building [social] connections' and 'extracurricular activities'. This movement aimed at ensuring that students in all yeargroups in Japan's schools enjoyed equal educational opportunities and fully reclaimed school days lost to the pandemic, not only in terms of study hours but in the 'numerous aspects' of school life.

Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike, Osaka Governor Hirofumi Yoshimura, as well as many other prefectural governors, had expressed support for the September start. In a joint statement, they welcomed the shift as an opportunity, in a time that

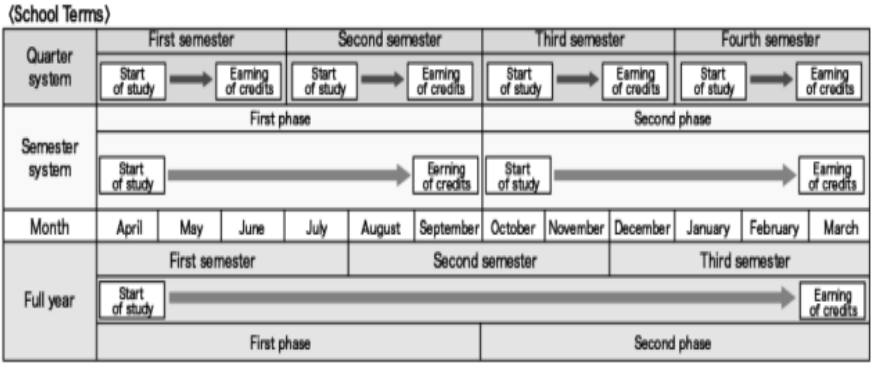
called for “bold” change and a “paradigm shift” in society that would consolidate the move to a September start. Abe was actively considering it and suggested that the LDP government might consider a proposal to introduce a school year starting in September (*Ashahi Shinbun* April, 29).

Japanese education system and the academic year

The current education system in Japan was introduced by the American Occupation, with the aims of ‘democratization’, ‘demilitarization’, and ‘decentralization’ of Japanese society. These purposes were clearly opposed to the dominant characteristics of the pre-war education system. Six years of elementary and three years junior high schools are compulsory for children aged from 6 to 15 (for a total of 9 years). There are also special schools for handicap children. After compulsory education, students may then enter high school for an additional 3 years. Over 98% of students progress. There are two types of high schools: one offers general education while the second offers vocational education. Higher education is provided mainly through 4 years university courses and 2 year junior college courses which offer higher level specialized education. This is called the ‘6-3-3-4’ system. Before starting school, children aged 3 and up to school age can receive education in kindergartens. The current education system is mostly based on the principle of equality of opportunity and provision of a uniformly high quality of basic education (Okada 2012).

According to Article 59 of the Ordinance for the Implementation of the School Education Law, “The elementary school year shall start on April 1, and end on March 31 of the following year,” and junior high and high schools match the elementary schedule. The first term runs to around the last week of July, when summer vacation begins. Students return to school early September (or late August) for the second term, which lasts until about 25 December. The third term begins from early January and continues to late March.

Fig1. Academic Term System in Japanese School



The long holiday seasons are usually in summer (end July ~early September), winter (end December ~early January) and spring (February ~ March).

The standardization of the April-March system can be traced back to the Elementary School Law of 1900, but there appears to be no definitive record of its origin (Yamazumi 1986). The most widely recognized clarification is that the school year was set up to coincide with the fiscal year, which is the period used to sort out public finances from April to March under Article 11 of the Public Finance Law. Governmental, academic, and business organisations account for their activities from April. Though happenstance provide the most likely explanation for the school year beginning in April, there is a popular hypothesis that it begins in the spring, the season of new beginnings, in accordance with a particular proclivity for the seasons held by Japanese people (however defined). Regardless of the explanation, many Japanese people do indeed place value on the symbolism of spring and its cherry blossoms as a season of new beginnings and a season in which young people demonstrate fulfilling their potential at academic graduation ceremonies and academic and company entrance ceremonies.

The current debate on the issues of September enrolment

Historically, the strongest advocacy for the September start has unfolded in reference to university education. Enrolment in autumn has become an international

standard. Schools in the U.S., UK, France and the Chinese mainland strongly tend toward September enrolment. India and Pakistan are the only other countries in the world where the academic year starts in April. It begins in January in Singapore and three other countries, and in March in South Korea, Argentina and three others, in May in Thailand, in June in the Philippines and Myanmar, and in October in Egypt and Cambodia. In all other nations, the academic year begins in September. Though in Japan, the April start to the school year provokes little inconvenience in elementary, junior high, and high school, there are various reasons why it has caused more inconveniences in higher education. The following are some of the reasons (Yonezawa, 2009; Fujita 2013).

To begin with, most universities in Japan have adopted a system that divides the academic year into semesters: the first semester lasts from April to July, followed by a summer vacation during August and September. The second semester lasts from October to January, with February and March reserved for entrance examinations, graduation ceremonies and other campus events are undertaken during the two-month spring vacation. To pack all the educational plans into the main semester that begins in April, classes must proceed through the end of July. Some have argued that it is irrational to run classes through the intense heat and humidity of July and to have students take their summer vacation in September when the climate is milder. Second, the gap between Japan and the majority of countries, with all of which Japan enjoys academic exchange, presents issues for students, researchers and academic staff. Thirdly, it inconveniences Japanese professors participating in global academic gatherings that are booked to best suit the school year beginning in September, for example in the summer break under the September-start system. Fourthly, large Japanese companies hire new university graduates in April, so students who go abroad fear losing their chance to apply for jobs.

Calls for a September start have emerged before. In 1987, an Ad-Hoc Education Reform Council set up by the late Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone made a suggestion to move the school year to September, yet advised against prompt progress considering the need to manufacture public agreement (Schoppa, 1991; Hood, 2001). It is also important that the move would impact numerous

sectors, including work and social administrations. In 2007, a legal revision gave university presidents the power to determine when to begin the academic year of each university.

Changing to a September start was also seriously analysed in 2011, 2012 and 2013. In the past, the government has appointed study groups to evaluate changes to encourage the internationalization of higher education in Japan which many feel lagging behind other countries (Onishi, 2012). The number of such Japanese college students studying abroad peaked in 2004 before going into decline. The number of study abroad programs has increased due to government efforts, but in most cases, it is a short-term stay of less than a month. The influence of Japanese company hiring practices are seen to be the greatest drawback of changing to a September start.

In 2012, Junichi Hamada, then president of the University of Tokyo, proposed moving the beginning of the academic year for colleges to September — fundamentally as mean for internationalization of the Japan's higher education sector (Hamada, 2013). According to his proposal, elementary to high schools would keep the current school year system. Those graduating from high school in March would spend the half-year period (or one year) until entering the university in September in any way they like — studying abroad, engaging in volunteer activities, or doing part-time work to earn money. Though shorter, this is analogous to a systemized 'gap year' (Hada, 2011).

In its final report in 2014, a Ministry of Education panel, on which Hamada was serving, reviewed the pros and cons of shifting to September (MEXT, 2014). On the plus side, the switch would "upgrade the worldwide progression of graduates by remaining in accordance with the school year of the U.S. and Europe" (*ibid*). On the minus side, the new schedule would move graduation to summer — influencing numerous organizations that recruit new alumni every year. The report warned that both hiring and certification exams, like those for doctors, would fall out of sync because they hinge on graduation being held in March.

As a result, internal resistance forced the country's most prestigious universities to abandon their plans. Questions also arose about how students would spend their "gap year." During the ensuing eight years, little progress has been

made in internationalizing the Japanese university education. While the University of Tokyo and Kyoto University remain among the best 100 institutions of higher educations in the world, Tohoku University, Osaka University and the Tokyo Institute of Technology have since exited the world's Top 200.

Debates over introducing the September start under the COVID-19

The outbreak of Covid-19 suddenly shifted the debate. A new viable argument appeared that *the lack of action* would see months of students' school life lost or diminished. In the new debate, elementary and secondary schools were the key protagonists, with universities following. School closure reignited calls among new actors, particularly students, parents and local government leaders, interested firstly in the learning of children and the sudden opportunity and secondarily to synchronize with the international standard.

Pros and Cons of September start

The section evaluates the merit and demerit of September enrolment in Japan (Akimoto, 2020).

On April 29, the National Prefectural Governors' Association decided to ask the LDP government to consider introducing a school year starting in September. At a parliamentary meeting at May, Abe had sounded positive about changing the school year to start in September, saying that he wanted to "consider various options in advance." The government had set up a working group headed by former education minister Masahiko Shibayama to make recommendations next month.

Opinion on shifting the beginning of school year was split. Supporters saw the pandemic as a chance to break with the current academic calendar and to bring undeniable benefits to students. Others warned of the complexity of the knock-on effects of changing the date, particularly referring to the structure of academic life and the structure of job recruitment.

At the start of May, the assessments of public sentiment by the media showed that the general population tended to support proposals for moving to a September start. On May 10, a Yomiuri Shinbun survey found that 54 percent were in favour, versus 34 percent against. A separate review by the powerful Nikkei

business highlighted a comparable pattern.

Proponents pointed to the facts that Japanese universities are not as globalized as Western universities and that few Japanese students study abroad. Changing the current calendar to the beginning of September might facilitate greater internationalization, by accepting more inbound international students and dispatching more domestic students abroad.

Supporters also raised concerns about students graduating in March without being able to study and fully enjoy school life. Any attempt to meet the required classroom hours after the suspension of school would drastically abbreviate the summer vacation, and probably include an expectation for students to attend school for longer hours, to attend classes on Saturdays and to forego non-study activities. The late commencement of classes due to the suspension could lead to the cancellation of important school events, such as athletic festivals and field trips. The September start appeared to kill two birds with one stone. Students could make up for the truncated academic year resulting from school closures and would be able to avoid taking exams during the winter months. The reduction in preparation time for important entrance exams scheduled for early the following year due to school closures has put high school students wishing to enter university at a disadvantage.

Supporters noted that another drawback of the Japanese educational cycle is having to take exams during the cold and flu season. In Japan, the National Centre Test for University Admissions, a two-day standardized university entrance test, which more than 400,000 applicants have taken annually since its introduction in 1990, is usually held in mid-January. They sate that the beginning of the school year in September would mean that university entrance exams would not need to be held any longer in the winter when they have to worry about getting the flu and how to get to test locations in snowy weather.

It is already likely that the circumstances arising from the pandemic might result in changes in the University's policies for this cycle. As the peak of university entrance exams and the spread of the virus overlap, MEXT advised universities nationwide to consider flexible measures according to the situation of each university in order to secure admission opportunities for applicants. According to a MEXT survey, 54 schools would hold additional tests for affected applicants, while

332 would allow such applicants to shift to other tests already planned for later dates. Both measures would be adopted at 122 schools. Prior to the first entrance examination scheduled for February 25, public universities had different responses to the spread of the coronavirus. Some 80 percent of Japan's 593 private universities were take special measures for applicants who were unable to take tests due to the coronavirus.

The Japanese Educational Research Association (JERA: *Nihon kyōiku gakkai*)

Petitions supporting each side of the discussion have drawn a large number of signatures each from the general population. The opposition perspectives on the September start are well represented by a comprehensive statement of the Japanese Educational Research Association (JERA) the country's largest academic association in the education field. JERA petitioned the Prime Minister's Office and MEXT. Teruyuki Hirota, JERA's president held a news conference at the Ministry of Education on 22nd May. He stressed the need for "thorough, nationwide discussions", rather than the sudden floating of a half-baked ideas. Hirota accused the governors for promoting a narrow set of interests without familiarity with the reality of Japan's education system.

In a proposal announced on 22nd May, JERA suggested that shifting the whole education system at every level would create an "extraordinarily heavy burden, both on human resources and on other aspects of the system (JERA 2020). The proposal then summarized the points of merits and demerits of the reform from the standpoint of education studies. Below is discussion on its main lines of reasoning.

Firstly, a special JERA taskforce had assembled estimations that the expenses of the additional 5-6 months in school, including forecasts of costs to individual family units with children between elementary school and high school. This would add up to ¥2.5 trillion.

Secondly, if the school starting age remained the same without additional measures, children born in the 17 months from 2nd April, 2013 would be eligible for enrolment into the fist year of elementary school in September 2020. Supposing that

no specific measures are taken, in the first year there will be a lack of around 28,000 teachers (Kariya, 2020). Alternatively, if standby measures were taken, keeping children of the following year's cohort in nursery school for longer, Takehiko Kariya, Professor of Oxford University, estimates that the number of nursery school children on standby due to this is estimated to be about 260,000 and there would be a shortage of 17,000 nursery workers.

More simply put, the five-month delay will cause almost 1.5 times the typical number of children to enter the first year of elementary school. This would "inundate" schools across the country during the principal year the move was actualized (either in 2020, or at a later year using "standby" mechanisms). JERA added that a postponement of even five months may involve "an enormous amount of work" to overhaul the curriculum guidelines by the education ministry.

In the most direct contingency imaginable, pupils at school age in the "bulge year " would be divided by finer grades of age (such as in half-year sub-cohorts). In the "standby" measures, suggested by Kariya because the additional demand for teachers could not possibly be met within five months, children may need to begin their required schooling at 7 years and 5 months old, which would make them among the world's oldest new pupils. This would go against the current worldwide pattern toward starting obligatory training younger.

Thirdly, university students whose graduation is delayed would experience financial hardship due to the six-months additional living expenses and potentially fees. Universities are already facing additional expenses due to their local corona alleviation measures. Pushing back the official start of the current academic year to September might ignite calls for universities to reimburse students for tuition from April to August, even though many of them have already started teaching classes — albeit remotely — for this semester. Such a massive refund could cost private universities alone nearly ¥1 trillion. Moreover, the proposal argued that the change would not only need to address school-related issues caused by the pandemic, but also other long-standing problems, such as the schedule for employment.

Fourthly, the proposition questioned employing and retirement schedules. The proposed move to a September start has immense influence for conventional

corporate recruitment, since most firms employ new recruits *en masse* after graduation in April, coordinated with the start of the fiscal year. University students start the quest for employment during their third year and begin working not long after graduation. Some large firms have introduced creative strategies to recruit the best talent. However, smaller organizations, which hire about 70% of Japan's labour force, may find it difficult to adapt.

Fifthly, the JERA proposition accepts the potential for internationalization of universities. Some scholars object that the absence of English education in Japanese universities renders internationalization a more distant prospect. According to Hirota, “Even the prospect of more Japanese going abroad remains to be realised. The Japanese social tradition is to enter universities soon after high school graduation and then proceed [directly] to new jobs.”.

In short, JERA concluded that the proposed plan starting September 2021 may not solve current problems caused by the coronavirus shutdown. Hirota clarified that the change would not only require the reorganization of the current educational framework that could at last take "10 years or more", but also cost a lot for both government and families. Finally, the proposal reiterated the traditional association between the new academic year and springtime. It seems fitting that graduation and the posting of admission results should take place during cherry blossom season in March, followed by enrolment in April.

After this proposal, government officials were divided: While Abe was positively considering it at the beginning, the Ministry of Education gradually came to take a more cautious stance.

Komeitō, the junior partner in the ruling coalition government, urged the government to take time to study the issues thoroughly, engaging in thorough public discussion. At a news conference in late May, education minister Koichi Hagiuda said, “It is not an issue that can be managed only by the Ministry of Education. It affects the whole of society, and adjustments would need to be considered accordingly.”

The momentum for reform of the school year quickly evaporated as it

became clear that schools would reopen in June and concern was voiced over the extra costs for the government and households associated with a transition to the academic year. All things considered, the government closed the immediate prospect of reform by asking the government working group to undertake further research and to table a revised plan for the adoption of the September start that would add five additional months to the school year. The question has thus been removed from the imperative and circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Some measures for reopening school against the coronavirus

After the scramble to teach classes online alongside the discussion of shifting to a September start, school children were gradually set to return to classrooms around the beginning of June using a "hybrid model". This involved a mix of ordinary classroom learning, online learning and homework.

Soon after resuming school, class sizes were reduced, with most students passing about half their time in class and half learning at home. Children would alternate mornings and afternoons or attend on days on which there would otherwise be no teaching. Schools actualized (physical) social distancing measures. They created space between chairs, and staggered arrival, departure and break times. This physical space would be also expanded by utilizing not only the school, but also other social places such as libraries, community halls, leisure centres and conference venues. Time in school would increase incrementally for the remainder of the school year, and intermittently in localised pockets in the following year.

Online class teaching

Since the announcement of nationwide school closures, offers of free online education materials arose from magazines and public interest groups. Teachers communicated with their pupils via laptops and video links (Ishido, 2020). These spurred hopes of improved IT infrastructure in schools.

The physical equipment needed to set up online lessons is relatively simple, requiring just a camera-equipped device, a high-speed Internet connection, and a web conferencing platform such as Zoom. However, conceptual and procedural knowledge and comfort of teachers was (and is) far more challenging.

Few teachers knew enough about creating on-demand lessons or features available to video conferencing-type classrooms. A MEXT study at the time found that only 10% of government funded schools gave any type of online guidance to students throughout the break. These included uploading recordings of lessons to video-sharing sites and livestreaming. MEXT described such provision as “an area where Japan is the least prepared among developed nations” (MEXT 2020c).

Although it was decided that one computer or tablet would be distributed to all elementary, junior high, and high school students by the end of year, priority was ostensibly given to children who do not have access to a computer at home and areas with a high proportion of such households.

The unprecedented disruption has set off a move toward online teaching that may accelerate a shift away from the traditional textbook-based classroom that has thus far been the hallmark of Japanese education (Bamkin, 2022). Indeed, even before the coronavirus epidemic, the Nomura Research Institute (2017) estimated that Japan's online education market would increase by 50% to 310 billion yen ($3 billion) between 2019 and 2023. This was spurred to some degree by the earlier announcement of the Abe government to make tablet PCs accessible to all students by 2023 (*ibid*). The pandemic and the extended school closures are likely to accelerate that growth. What is required now for Japan is to endeavour to support and to finance the digital infrastructure required for online classes.

A critical moment for the spread of the COVID-19

The prolonged school closures caused by the epidemic have intensified concerns that inequities in education are growing. Experts of educational sociology have warned that the effects of inequities are both severe and cumulative (Miura, 2020). The interference to children’s learning is occurring when vital developmental matters are most salient, since these improvements give an essential foundation to ability and development, and ultimately success throughout life.

Even during the early stages of the pandemic, worries were mounting because home-based study is shaped by the environment students find themselves in. Children in poor, two-working-parents and single-parent families are at greater risk (Mastsuoka, 2020; NHK, 2020; Nippon Zaidan 2020). Those children are

regularly left alone at home and share small rooms with siblings. It seems very difficult to study at home unless they are extraordinarily motivated.

In general, wealthier families with stable home environments found themselves able to navigate school closures, finding alternative space and various learning resources (Downey et al.2004, Marcotte, 2007). Parents encouraged children and sat together with children in front of the computers used for online study. However, for parents of poor families, this was not an option. Those parents who take time of work faced diminished pay. They were anxious that the closure would adversely affect the children's chances to pass high school or university entrance exams – knowing their disadvantageous position and powerless to address it.

This disruption, if left unaddressed, may shift children's developmental trajectories. Therefore, school authorities, public health centres and government ministries responsible for children and education must collaborate in order to create inclusive, supportive and safe environments, especially during transitions between levels of schooling.

Emergency Economic Measures

The enduring social and emotional impacts are likely be COVID-19's greatest legacy, and widening inequality by compounding extant inequities. How the Japanese government responds to these incalculable disruptions would determine their outcome. Financial support, social and emotional well-being and the foundations of learning should be top priorities.

On 20th April 2020, the Emergency Economic Measures to deal with COVID-19 were embraced by the Cabinet, and the Japanese government provided cash payments to all families in Japan. The government provided ¥100,000 per person to all residents, including foreign nationals who are recorded in the Basic Resident Registration System. A sum of around 117 trillion Japanese yen was anticipated for the entire subsidy. At one point, the government had planned on distributing 300,000 yen as "temporary life assistance provision" to households whose incomes had dropped drastically due to the outbreak. However, critics pointed out that the system would necessitate complicated criteria to be applied in

a very short timeframe, and so the means-tested provision was dropped in favour of an easily administered universal handout.

Also, the Japanese government and several prefectures have implemented special measures to help companies against the deterioration in business. The government supports business activities through (1) special measures for employment and (2) financial support for small and medium enterprises.

The Household Accounting application operator Money Forward Inc. surveyed 7,827 of its approximately 10 million clients in mid-May asking how they would use the temporary life assistance provision (Money Forward Inc., 2020). Around 60% of the respondents were in their 30s-40s. The most common response for the utilization of the 100,000-yen handout in the survey, for which multiple answers were allowed, was to "cover everyday costs" (38%). This reflected people's anxieties over a decrease in their income due to temporary business closures and heightened concerns for their futures

Numerous students in Japan were compelled to drop out of university studies for financial reasons directly caused by the pandemic. The lockdown closed businesses that otherwise provided part-time jobs. It also caused reduce wages being received by parents and other family members on which students were otherwise dependant for study. The Cabinet approved a program to provide up to ¥200,000 in a cash handout to each of around 430,000 university and other students in the nation struggling financially to pay for tuition or living costs amid the spread of the coronavirus.

Students from abroad likewise qualified for the program. Students from low-pay families received ¥200,000 each and others ¥100,000. The government put aside ¥53 billion from reserves under its first supplementary budget of the 2019-20FY to fund the program. Eligible for the program were graduate and undergraduate students at universities, students at junior, technical and vocational colleges and foreign students studying at Japanese language schools. Public and private universities have also asked the government to offer financial support as grant-type economic aid and as tuition waivers for students. But some students have criticized the program, arguing it should offer more, and cover or reduce tuition fees.

The consequence is that, even with good motives, the government did not meet the fast help it had promised as the economy faces its greatest recession in over sixty years.

Child Poverty

The spread of the coronavirus projects a dark shadow over youngsters and families with existing financial troubles or in financially precarious positions. The impact of having no classes for a quarter of a year are tremendous. School dinners (offered each school day) vanished after schools were closed, and was often the last provision to return. Concurrently, parents voluntarily or involuntarily stopped or reduced work.

Child poverty has been increasingly recognized as a growing problem Japan. Japan's child poverty rate is not low. At 13.9% (2015 value, OECD Stat), one out of seven children in Japan lives in a poor household. This rate is higher than the U.K. (11.2%), Germany (11.2%), France (11.3%) and most European countries, even though it is lower than Korea (16%), Canada (17.1%) and the U.S. (20.2%). However, for a long time since 1960s, the Japanese government and society in general has remained blissfully unaware of this problem. It is only after 2009 that "child poverty" became a recognized social issue. In 2013, the Law to Promote Measures Against Child Poverty became the first law to directly address child poverty. Unlike numerous other nations, Japanese child and teenager poverty did not manifest itself in significant increases in juvenile crime or delinquency. Thus, Japan's poverty can be described as an "invisible poverty".

Abe Aya's (2008) book entitled *Child Poverty: Re-examining Japan's Inequality* is widely acclaimed to be the first book which focuses on the Japanese experience of child poverty. Abe says that the administration had been zeroing in on measures to urge parents to work. However, there were numerous people with unsteady business structures, and customarily there was no welfare allowance for child-raising families. Abe notes that the government should have improved welfare measures for costs of living and child-raising. Regarding the pandemic, Abe expressed that there should be 1) expansion in allowance, 2) spread of information on different sorts of help through schools, and 3) preventing household utility

service being cut even due to non-payment of bills (NHK, 2020). Abe Aya stated that it was important to convey the message that poor family would not disappear, and should be able to spend money on food expenses with confidence.

Support through NPO activities

Against this backdrop, non-profit organizations (NPO) in some local areas offer free meals to children, create ‘a place to be (*ibasho*)’ and offer tutoring to children and school students from economically struggling families. For example, NPO-run “kids' cafeterias (*kodomo shokudō*)” have received publicity (Yoshida, 2016, Machida 2018). Nevertheless, a solitary kid’s cafeteria can only assist 10 to 20 children, and most are open only one or two days per month. These NPO were likewise limited in their exercises during corona-related restrictions, and their volunteers have decreased their participation due to the pandemic restrictions.

Several NPOs found that many students had no devices other than smartphones for taking such lessons or accessing Wi-Fi at home. Some students did not want their homes seen online by others, while students without their own rooms are worried that their siblings will disturb their classes. It’s important to have a place outside the home to study,

To react to those requirements, the government provided an emergency support framework to NPO corporations that support people and children in poverty (Cabinet Office 2020). It was set up with a budget of 5 billion yen. It opened grant applications between late-May and mid-June 2020, and conveyed the grants to NPOs by the end of July.

NPO activities are in a unique position of regular and often daily contact with isolated families. Through these funds, they helped to further support the emotional and social well-being of children and often parents, providing free meals and referral to necessary services. Some NPOs also lent laptops and Wi-Fi devices to households below the poverty line to allow their children to access learning resources during the temporary closure of schools and times of reduced classes. Utilizing these funds as a stop-gap to provide the most essential support, NPOs praised the partial success of measures that reduced the anticipated gap between

children with and without access to online devices during the school closures. Nonetheless, the government must focus on the root problem, which is poverty and its causes. Tackling child-poverty requires a more sustained and more strategic framework of policy.

Conclusion

The coronavirus crisis has forced Japan to make hasty transformations to its educational methods, including closing schools and implementing distance learning.

Toward the beginning of the coronavirus outbreak, schools were concerned of being over-stretched not only because of the demand for online learning during closures, but also because of calls to shift the school-year to begin in September. The debate on the start of the school year to September posed a question as to whether Japan is prepared to accept changes in its familiar systems. Supporters of the reform also said that a September start would make it easier for Japanese students to study abroad and for foreign students to come to Japan. The opposition warned that it was not simply a matter of changing the date, given the way academic life was structured, how job recruitment revolved around it, and either the creation of an immediate “bulge year” or the postponement of school-entry for a “standby cohort”. This crisis has brought elementary and high schools into the conversation of changing the start date of the academic year.

However, behind this turmoil, educational disparity has been exacerbated by the prolonged school closure. The coronavirus has exposed the extent of myriad inequalities in schooling, from access to resources for financially disadvantaged children and families to the supportive and safe surroundings needed for optimal learning. Programmes such as online learning were systemically more beneficial to the already advantaged groups. Other programmes specifically aimed at children in poverty genuinely reduced the extent of the damage of the pandemic, but did more to expose the extent of child poverty in Japan, and the immense risk of it being compounded by any crisis. Disparities are dramatically more noteworthy in the midst of emergency.

Without detracting from government policies aiming to return normalcy

and to promote technology in education, the very real problem of child poverty must be recognized and must be addressed with a serious, long-term strategy. Policies should be created with this group specifically in mind. Indeed, policies which attempt a combination of in-person and online learning risk exacerbating and further institutionalizing the gap which is already chasmic.

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