

# A Tale of Two Breakdowns: A Comparative Analysis of School Collapse in America and Japan

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## Abstract

The author aims to compare school breakdown in two countries, the United States and Japan. It is speculated in the paper that the causes of breakdown differ though the results portend problems for the future in both countries. The author offers several possible solutions for stemming the so-called collapse in the two education systems, one which would appear engineered and one which would seem to be the result of a complexly amoebic system that is difficult to alter significantly save for extensive reform.

**NOTE:** As this author refuses to recognize the legitimacy of the 2000 American Presidential Election, Mr. Bush will be referred to in this paper hereafter as President-select Bush rather than President Bush. His father will be referred to as ex-President Bush.

## OVERVIEW: Education Creeps into the Major Party Agendas

The American Presidential Election of 2000 highlighted some disturbing inconsistencies. Two of the country's most treasured principles, democracy and free political process, came into question. It seemed inconceivable that the judicial body would step in and rule a victor in the election, a blatantly illegal move that should require the jailing of all nine Supreme Court justices. (Bugliosi, p. 12) Bugliosi put it this way: "The Court majority, after knowingly transforming the votes of 50 million Americans into nothing and throwing out all of the Florida undervotes, actually wrote that their ruling was intended to preserve "the fundamental right" to vote.... Nothing is more important in a democracy than the right to vote. And implicit in the right is that the vote will be counted." (Bugliosi, 2001, pp. 12-13)

This sad outcome, however, really did happen. It must have seemed extremely odd to the rest of the world that Americans, after years of lecturing the globe on the importance of creating and maintaining free societies and democracies, watched its election rigged outright with scarcely a peep of protest. The country (meaning the people) failed to expose what appears to be historic destiny in the States if one reads back to James Madison's Federalist Paper #10: "But the most common and durable source of factions, has been the various and unequal distribution of property. Those who hold and those who are without property have ever formed distinct interests in society." (Gunn, 1994, p. 543)

The election seemed to confirm the notion that the plutocratic/oligarchic minority in the neo-liberal economic structure Americans euphemistically refer to as a “free market democracy” can and will assert itself, even illegally or unethically, if its interests are jeopardized in any way. Such academics as Noam Chomsky and Robert McChesney regularly discuss this.

Political chicanery was certainly suspected by many. The “two-party system” (which America is not) asserted itself in blocking out a third party from a public debate, a curious decision considering Ross Perot, a Reform Party candidate in 1992 and 1996, was permitted to debate in prior elections without meeting the standards set for the Green Party candidate in 2000.

On issues, there was little way of distinguishing the two main-party candidates once rhetoric was set aside. Al Gore, the Democratic Party candidate, brazenly pledged to “fight for the people, not the powerful” and claimed that he would go after the poll-tested bogeymen (big oil, big insurance, big drugs) in his nomination acceptance speech. Just days later, however, one could read in *The Wall St. Journal* about how his vice-presidential running mate had quickly followed in his wake to “assure big business that it had just been impassioned rhetoric” and that he was truly behind big business. (Nader, 2002, p. 16)

One of the interesting aspects of the election, however, was that each candidate maintained a public stance on education. Just eight years earlier, education had been written off as a non-issue. It was common to come across such quotes as the following: “Have you noticed how health care is on every politician’s agenda, and education is on no one’s?” (Barber, 1993, p. 46) Somehow, education had risen to the fore. Perhaps it was the lack of perceived problems; perhaps it was in the interest of doing something good with a budget surplus that a war on terrorism would later usurp.

## IN A STATE OF PERMANENT COLLAPSE

The stances of the two major parties were emblematic of America’s basic attitude toward education in the 2000 presidential election. Republican candidate George Bush talked about accountability and leaving no child behind (which sounded a great deal like his father a decade earlier: “Every child will come to school ready to learn.”) He pledged \$13.5 billion over five years while Gore made an astonishing pledge of \$115 billion over ten years. The figures are both astounding not because of the monetary value, but because of the questionable sincerity with which they were pledged. First, the figures paled in comparison with money allocated to defense projects. Secondly, both seemed to have little basis in reality; they seemed like figures plucked from a bingo number dispensary. In fact, Mr. Gore hinted that even more funding would come from the illusionary, bubble-inflated high-tech surplus that began deflating shortly after the election debacle.

Since the federal government gets involved in education only to the tune of 7% of public school funding, taking stances on such issues seems trite to many. It appears to have become, however, the necessary window dressing for today’s ambitious leader. Education is an easy issue on which to talk big because action will never be demanded. In fact, education is in a permanent state of collapse in the United States because it serves the nation well. One could call it an engineered collapse or a permanent state of breakdown. Noam Chomsky said in *Manufacturing Consent* that it was scandalous for a

country with America's wealth to be unable to produce widespread, decent health care. It is more curious yet that a country with America's wealth has failed to structurally develop its education system during the past 90 years (considering that it has not fundamentally changed since 1910.) However, Chomsky does go on to say that, "... the position of elites (in America) is that they want the masses to be ignorant and stupid. Education is a system of imposed ignorance." (Achbar, 1994, p.157)

Japan, on the other hand, is in the midst of what is often called school collapse, a sort of system breakdown. Public figures and TV commentators seem to speculate often on the roots of school collapse (known in Japanese as *gakkyu houkai*), but many seem to feel that the entire paradigm on which the system was founded collapsed, and the education system, rather than respond flexibly, remains remarkably static. Attempts are made to remedy the ailments the school system suffers, but it is like putting adhesive bandages on a critically wounded person with broken bones and internal injuries. Essentially, because the fundamental purpose of education is now in question, how to respond is difficult to impossible. Since few seem certain that education should be doing anything differently today than twenty years ago, the system marches on stalwartly, hoping that the nation's relatively homogeneous roots will hold it together. Merely a decade ago, *shakaisei* and *kokoro* were still the ostensible pillars of compulsory education.

Interestingly, an OECD report issued at the end of the last century praised Japan as having one of the best education systems in the world, as it scored highest on the OECD scale with 90.6 in educational attainment, and the United States placed third at 87.1 (NOTE: Germany was second with 88.9.) Central to this achievement, however, was Japan's ostensible low outlay on public education. Both systems, in fact, appear "cost efficient" while countries like Sweden and France clearly spend "too much" on education by the OECD's reckoning. Their 10% of GDP represents a squandering in OECD judgement. Furthermore, it would appear that the OECD places high value on the processing of students, an objective statistic that is relatively meaningless given the subjective nature of education. (James, 1999, p. 13)

## AMERICA'S ENGINEERED STATE OF BREAKDOWN

The ostensible concern with contemporary education or its perceived inequities can be traced back to 1983, when a report issued by the National Commission on Excellence in Education called *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* identified threats to American national security and well-being stemming from declining intellectual and academic prowess. The threat was not limited to a Cold War dimension; Japan and Germany were the more frequently mentioned specters. The possibility of falling behind economically seemed to motivate Americans to discuss education. As evidence, the report cited declining standardized test scores, declining math and science skills, and functional illiteracy among others.

George Bush Sr., who dubbed himself, "The Education President", organized governors in the hopes of tackling the woes of education in 1989 with his "America 2000" program. Some of the main aims were to overhaul American education by the year 2000 so that:

1. All children would start school ready to learn.

2. The high school graduation rate would increase to 90%.
3. The nation's students would be first in the world in math and science.
4. All schools would be free of drugs and firearms.

The eight goals, established by a panel of 18, indicate a recurring problem with American education. (Uchida, 1996, p. 57) It attempts to set recklessly idealistic goals and targets that cannot be possibly be achieved without federal control. 11 years after it set its aims, the results can scarcely be deemed successful. Not one state made it to a 90% graduation rate. In fact, in the last year, 1999, South Carolina posted a 55% rate. (Famighetti, 2000, p. 250) However, it made a nice sounding goal.

America seems content to accept platitudes without action. No one has demanded that *budgets* be increased to pursue higher international achievement in math and science. Just as the candidates for the presidency could produce arbitrary figures to devote to education, national committees can establish goals that cannot be fulfilled. Just as Al Gore could claim that he would devote \$50 billion to universal pre-school programs (Jenkins, 2000, p. 17), it could be claimed that American students would rise to world leadership in math and science. In fact, Mr. Gore's plan seems paradoxically odd considering the inequitable nature of schooling from kindergarten through senior high school. Why accept injustice throughout the system, and suddenly offer it only at the pre-school level?

"Accountability" is a word one frequently encounters in education-related discussion these days. Education, as with any profession, is full of such terms. "Performance-referenced", "outcome-oriented" are two more such terms that are used to rally teachers to greater success... success, of course, being an elusive and subjective term. Furthermore, such terms imply fading trust in educators at all levels. Yet oddly, the accountability that is demanded of today's teaching profession is not applied to those in charge of policy making, it would seem. Who held anybody accountable for the Goals 2000 plan? 2000 came and went, yet the goals faded with scarcely a trace of protest or a Molotov cocktail. It would appear that American education remains an aristocracy to which all *can* belong rather than a system of equitability. It is a macrocosmic manifestation of the frequently uttered motivator, "You, too, could be president."

Bush's successor, Bill Clinton, liked to speak of every school connecting to the Super Information Highway. In fact, he frequently spoke of every classroom connecting by the year 2000, an outrageous promise given the inequitable structure of American education. Despite some reasonable plans for resuscitating a very ailing system, for example, \$5 billion to create and maintain after-school programs, increased funding for Head Start, an early literacy program, and relief for needy families, all outlined in his 1999 State of the Union Address, the president continued to uphold the broken-down state of education with such proclamations as: "My reform plan holds states and school districts accountable for progress and helps them turn around their worst-performing schools, or shut them down." (Shrag, 2000, p. 12) President Clinton, throughout his terms in office, pushed for increased standardized testing. President-select Bush followed through on this architecture. By January 2000, every state but one had adopted standardized testing for its public schools in at least one subject. By 2001, an education bill had been passed by Congress outlining a national testing plan: annual tests in grades three through eight, plus one in high school. But the meter by which one could almost certainly judge Mr. Clinton's faith in the system came down to this: While cheering on public education enthusiastically and encour-

aging the proliferation of high technology, he sent his daughter to a private school, a signal that the president lacked faith in the system.

George W. Bush, as governor and as president-select, maintains similar such principles. If schools cannot prove themselves through standardized testing, funding is to be cut. The simple logic of this cannot fail to escape the average sensible individual. Take two schools, A and B. A is in a wealthy town, with well funded schools thanks to high property values. B, on the other hand, is badly impoverished. B's property taxes, though higher than A's as a percentage, scarcely bring in enough funds to run the system. Teachers salaries are abysmal, the facilities are in a state of terrible disrepair. Quite naturally, qualified teachers avoid the system. Turnover is predictably high. When standardized testing takes place, the school performs miserably. Its funding is cut, whatever might be supplementing its pitiful intake from local revenue sources, and the students suffer yet more.

Lewis Lapham derides education conferences as events at which teachers often issue "requiems during the keynote lectures." He refers to lectures that customarily invoke anecdotes exposing some shockingly banal lack of information. For example, he cites lectures that referred to "a girl from Oklahoma who thought the Holocaust was a Jewish holiday" or "a student unable to decipher a simple menu", followed by workshops demanding to know why education is not delivering "high quality product to the infrastructure." (Lapham, 2000, p. 8) Writer Jonathan Kozol adds to this, writing that he cannot understand why business leaders talk about children in education as "investments" or say such things as "money invested in education produces a high rate of return in productivity" (Kozol, 2000, p. 16) Both comments are reminiscent of comments made by IBM chairman Louis Gerstner on the need for education to prepare students for the marketplace or a Michigan State Board of Education technology plan lamenting that business had to spend \$25 billion on basic skills training for new workers, a statistic that is typical of industry. Such reports often lack in evidence and substance. In fact, industry rarely spends money on education and is not taxed very heavily to encourage it.

To say that the leading politicians in America have no good ideas would be inaccurate. There are numerous plans that could work to the country's advantage, or at least some sectors of American society. Providing tax credits for adults to return to school is a good idea. However, President Clinton frequently called for Americans to educate themselves to a better society. This was embedded in the notion that if you could armor yourself in job skills, you could achieve security in the "new economy". Providing funding for senior citizen-led reading programs such as Mr. Clinton's Read\*Write: Initiative was a fine idea because demographically, an increasing number of elderly people could volunteer their services to the good of children. Donations by a large computer company to help a rural community in Nebraska offer foreign languages for which it had no teachers (via video links) is demonstrative of America's potential to apply innovative solutions in classrooms. President-select Bush's Ten Percent Solution, which provides for automatic admission to any state university if a student graduates in the top ten percent of his or her class (Jenkins, 2000, page 17) was a good idea for helping some academically successful minority students. However, as an aggregate, they represent half-steps toward resolving a fundamental crisis: America's education system suffers a woeful imbalance. Its origins, its current problems, and its propensity for future trouble are clear. The system needs overhauling, not adjusting or tinkering.

## SOURCES OF PROBLEMS

America's education woes can be traced straight back to its founding document: the Constitution. As Thomas Jefferson was once quoted as saying with reference to the Constitution, "You cannot expect a man to wear a boy's breeches", the Constitution has never been reworked or re-written, particularly- and curiously- following modern history's unarguably most far-reaching event, the Industrial Revolution. When James Madison stressed the need for protecting the opulent from the masses, when the founding fathers made efforts to protect property through the Constitution, they were working within the framework of an agrarian society with a highly unbalanced distribution of wealth. After all, the majority of the people in America were not represented at the Constitutional Convention: slaves, indentured servants, women, Native Americans, and men without property. (Zinn, 1995, p. 90) In fact, roughly one-third qualified as property holding. By adding a Bill of Rights, the document makes some provisions for the freedom of the press, but clearly functions on behalf of a wealthy elite.

Americans have a tendency to lament bygone days, particularly with blurry nostalgia. When scholastic comparisons are made even with time periods as recent as the 1960s, one must take into consideration whom America was schooling. Economic well being has always taken precedence, and school enrollment was largely a privilege, often not available to even significant swathes of the population... the Black segment, for example. Indeed, *A Nation at Risk* may have set off an alarm on declining SAT scores, but no one could dispute that more were taking the examinations. In fact, America had engineered this decline in scores by enslaving the Black population, and then continuing its oppression up through the 1960s. Historians like to point to the individual battles waged by Blacks to break color barriers as heroic when it would be far more ethical to flip the issue around and accuse much of the entire population of outrageous crimes for excluding and oppressing this segment of its population for so long.

The amelioration of these conditions does not mean that America has overcome its structural problems educationally. If anything, the system limps along, borrowing from fads and trends. *Prisoners of Time*, the 1994 report on education, was sorely lacking in innovative ideas save for encouraging a lengthening of the school year and the adoption of school uniforms, both items picked up in one of the two countries studied carefully prior to preparation of the report: Japan and Germany. There is a sense that American education wants to know the secrets of what made these two countries economic giants, and the adoption of standardized testing shows that America longs to tap into this perceived success.

## THE STRUCTURAL PROBLEM

As mentioned earlier, the federal government is responsible for just 7% of the budget for education. It is used primarily in "in-box" fashion; requests and demands are made, and it is doled out in accordance with not only needs but such concerns as political motivations. In Wisconsin, for example, the state tried to implement a graduation examination. It was heavily lobbied by testing companies, and would have produced some very lucrative contracts for them. (Bacon, 2000, p. 43)

The primary system for funding is also the system's worse nightmare in terms of future problems. Funding simply cannot continue as it has. Property taxes cannot serve as the basis for an equitable education system; this may have been acceptable 200 years ago, but today, it is simply outmoded and unfair. Furthermore, it perpetuates the apartheid that the American government has never taken the responsibility to break down. In other words, it allows an extremely unjust system to perpetuate because it benefits the "bondholder." This is a direct line back to the Constitution's provisions, and is very republican in its provision for the elite classes and their participatory classes (i.e., those classes which Noam Chomsky identifies collectively as a "political class"). It is important to stress, however, that this system is not imposed on people, but rather that it benefits an elite class, or in the words of John Jay, "those who own the country ought to run it." There has been no widespread movement to radically alter American education or restructure its current configuration, battered as it is.

To understand the funding system requires elaborating on a model begun earlier in this paper. Let's return to the discussion of Town A and Town B. Town A has average property values of \$200,000, whereas Town B has average values of just \$60,000. Town A will tax property at 2%, thereby injecting \$4000 per unit into the educational coffers. Town B is already at a disadvantage; their 5% significantly higher tax rate brings in just \$3000 per unit.

To make the problem more befuddling, recall that property tax is a federal tax deduction. By this reckoning, homeowners get back a significant proportion of what they pay in property taxes. In wealthy communities, this amounts to a large subsidy for education. The next subsidy comes through mortgage deductions. Obviously, the larger the property value, the larger the mortgage- and the bigger the deduction. Hence, the federal government is in effect subsidizing good schooling through property policies. Like most taxes, of course, this works out to be a regressive tax, but when do we see politicians making bold suggestions regarding funding? Why not, for example, place a .05% tax on all stock trades? On a daily basis, stock trades can number in the hundreds of thousands. Such a tax would barely register on most individual radar screens, since 80% of America's wealth sits in the hands of 20% of its people (Greider, 1997, p. 417), yet it could potentially raise enormous amounts of public funding. There are numerous other options for tapping into "globalization" as well. Taxing currency transfers at an extremely low rate would generate considerable public funds. Again, however, education would need to be a national concern were this the case; otherwise, the inequities of location would be transferred to other areas, though in all likelihood, the impoverished would again be punished. As John Milton once said, "They who have put out the peoples eyes reproach them of their blindness." (Achbar, 1994, p. 14) Lower middle-class taxpayers like to think that they are getting a good deal on these "deductions" and "exemptions"; for the upper-middle to upper classes, they are outright subsidies. It would be difficult to imagine legislation passing that provided for outright housing subsidies for those with incomes over \$100,000 per year, but this is euphemistically what is happening.

Returning to the dual town comparison, teacher salaries are higher in Town A. They naturally attract a higher caliber teacher, not to mention incur the wrath of Town B's teachers, who resent lower salaries for doing precisely the same work... or perhaps more. The class division may extend to other sociological problems unaccounted for in monetary terms. For example, there may be significantly

more two-income families in Town B, a visibly lower standard of living, or some other consequence that reverberate on education.

Town A is able to afford computers and a music program. Town B cannot. It focuses on maintaining the most basic of facilities: Upkeep of the buildings, maintenance, textbooks for students, a library. Town A, on the other hand, is state of the art, and the ensuing education will most certainly reflect this.

Extrapolate and imagine a Town C in desperate straits. This school has enormous classes because it cannot hire enough teachers. It cannot buy enough toilet paper for its restrooms. Students share books. In *Savage Inequalities*, there are several points that highlight the futility in such cases. First, a veteran teacher talks about students dropping out in enormous proportions, nearly half. However, astonishingly, she expresses relief. Kozol writes: "If over 200,000 of Chicago's total student population of 440,000 did not disappear during their secondary years, it is not clear who would teach them." (Kozol, 1991, p. 54) There are other reasons aside from staffing costs that might have made this teacher happy. Not only were classes more manageable on a functional level, but testing scores may flourish. Poor or unmotivated students tend to drop out; by leaving, the standardized curve rises, putting Town C further from the funding cut off point judged by "accountability." Basically, what President-select Bush's initiative says is that if you go to Town C's school, you will have lousy teachers. Turnover will be high. You may not get your own textbooks. Then, if you don't perform well on the standardized test, and it is almost certain that you are unlikely to, your funding will be cut and your lights turned off. Chester Finn liked to say that national testing was difficult to administer politically because Democrats are suspicious of the word testing and Republicans are suspicious of the word national. In fact, as the election in 2000 showed, the window dressing filters down to an identical result: The system stays, and it stays local.

To tie this to home, Japanese expatriates clearly recognize the benefits of this system. Many settle in towns like Scarsdale, New York, a wealthy suburb with high property values. By clustering in such communities, Japanese families can not only create support networks, but they can take advantage of well-funded public education. Rather than pay for private education, they have learned to take advantage of a good situation. Upon returning, their children frequently lament differences in education system, a mantra chanted at such events as the Japan Overseas Educational Services annual speech contest: America, great; Japan, boring, systematic, uninspiring, dull, etc. However, these children, like their American counterparts, are sheltered from Ghetto Central and all of the conditions that accompany the apartheid-like side of America. I have yet to come across an idealistic Japanese person who, based on personal principles, insists that he will locate in Harlem and send his kid to a public school there during his interim in America. Instead, he will use the educational supplement that is hidden in his housing allowance to take advantage of the property-tax linked education system in America. In all fairness, however, looking at a school in Camden, New Jersey, or in Harlem, who could blame him?

## **CONFUSION NOW AND FOREVER**

Several years ago, the town of Hatfield Massachusetts voted to increase its property taxes so that the school system could meet its budget. The town voted down the proposal and forced it to turn to its “emergency” budget (a debate then ensued on whether education constituted an emergency.) The issue, however, provided interesting insight into the workings of modern education: The voters decided piecemeal on which issues to opt for. One of those interviewed said, “My retirement income was cut 60% (as he lived off of bank CDs, and the interest had declined) and a teacher wants me to fund a 5% salary raise?” (Giardina, 1994, p. 59) Another mentioned that education once constituted books, a classroom, and a teacher. By this reckoning, computers and gadgets should be purchased today outside of conventional budgets, not become part of them.

The discussion is prophetic of future debates on such issues. In a system with no clear set of standards, debate will be erratic and fragmented. Is heat important? Why can’t kids wear gloves and hats in inner city schools during the winter? Are books necessary for everybody or anybody for that matter? Who needs music or a library? The school as we know it may devolve into what it was 100 years ago given the growing number of old people and the possibility that they will not want to pay for much of what is needed for education any longer. It sounds absurd, but the situation in Hatfield signals such a possibility. Baby boomers will need to triple their savings in order to enjoy the standard of life in retirement to which they are currently accustomed; pensions and social security simply have not provided for the future generations (Bernheim, 1993, p. 67) Nor does anyone take into account delayed bills, such as ex-President George Bush Sr.’s \$157 billion bond sale to cover the savings and loan debacle in 1990. (Zepezauer, 1996, p. 45) Shoving this problem under the carpet until 2020 has postponed a potentially enormous outlay: \$1.4 trillion by many estimates, a sum that a diminished number of taxpayers will need to cover. However, it was a politically savvy move, and it illustrates how little divides the two major parties: Neither has ever brought up the issue in any election since 1990. How will education manage with health care for the elderly (a politically popular issue in 2020, no doubt), defense outlays (no visible end in sight), and such unexpected bills dropped as the S & L bill on future political agendas? Structural self-interest and survival will likely combine to freeze out education in areas of non-affluence. America’s apartheid will grow wider, doubtless.

## **DIVERSIONARY SOLUTIONS**

Other issues connected to funding have become increasingly common. The voucher issue is one of unnecessary complexity. Vouchers are clearly a diversionary tactic, a double-edged sword designed to keep the collaborative and marginalized classes pacified because they can be pitched on a level of “freedom of choice” as opposed to domination and control. Essentially, students are given vouchers that allow them to transfer to schools of their choice, thereby making escape more economically viable. However, the idea is bizarrely meritocratic. If you happen to succeed in a dismal situation, you will be thrown a rescue rope. This of course should bring up two questions that never get raised: What happens to the others in the pit? Why don’t they matter?

The answer is simple. They are not expected to matter given the structure. They are the Constitutional Convention's modern-day indentured servants, slaves, and penniless. Class is a dirty word in America; people do not like discussing it because it raises the specter of a society that is not free or democratic in a true sense. Europe has classes; America has the Statue of Liberty waving in everybody regardless of gender, color, or creed. Several years back, I spent a month at the University of California Irvine, which is located in an affluent suburb of Los Angeles. One day, I expressed an interest in going to the coast and asked for directions by bus. A female administrator (white and affluent) gave me a map and blotted out the center. The directions instructed me to detour clear around to the coast, as if there were a minefield in the middle or a large swamp. When I pressed her for details, she said, "You don't want to go there." I then did, and found out why: It was a lower class Black/Hispanic area and ostensibly deserved to be avoided like a pothole in a road. It was similar to the areas that are blocked out of the overseas residents' frameworks: Go to rich suburban areas like Scarsdale or Bergen County in New Jersey, and avoid the rest. Stick with the winners.

The children in the schools in the blotted out zone, similarly, need only be ignored, unless, of course, they have received a voucher that serves a suspiciously similar function to a get-out-of-jail free pass in the board game Monopoly. If they dare emerge from their low-tax lairs, they run a good risk of being incarcerated. This exposes the roots of another societal problem: increasing prison enrollment. Again, this is very likely a by-product of the nation's failure to deal with an education system that is blatantly, but somewhat invisibly, unfair. Distributing vouchers may help some escape the depths of despair, but it will likely result in nice tax breaks for those in the higher classes. What makes vouchers the most puzzling stroke in education is their very essence: Were education well structured and administered, vouchers would not be necessary, so the idea of distributing them widely is essentially a far more complex and muddled way of saying, "Let's make education sound nationally", logic that is similar to the Owenite argument that everybody can be rich (meaning that if everyone were rich, they might as well simply be well off; rich would have no meaning then.) In a recent study done in 2001, it was reported that 65% of Americans had never heard of vouchers, a stunning admission given that it could be the biggest issue in education today. (Kahlenberg, 2001, p. 31)

As education marches on haphazardly like paint sprayed on a Jackson Pollack canvas, various alternatives naturally arise. Not surprisingly, the Clinton administration strongly supported charter schools, a sound choice for an amoebic leader lacking in defining principles (lacking may be too weak a word). Charter schools naturally result in diversity and cater to a pluralistic society. However, is it diversity and pluralism that the young need? Will the modern-day hearth, the TV set, be the only unifying force in their lives? Alternatives and choice seem to be the key words as we turn the millennium. ROTC has not missed the chance; compared with a decade ago, in 2001, the Department of Defense spent \$234 million on Jr. ROTC, taking over schools and implementing their agendas. The Chicago Board of Education turned to the department for primarily one reason: It had no money. ROTC will provide texts, uniforms, and instructors for the first two years to launch an academy. There are other prerequisites as well, such as contributions toward teachers' salaries and supplies. In fact, the ROTC director became the highest paid administrator in Chicago (Goodman, 2002, p. 59), demonstrating the clout the Defense Department has. For the young ROTCs, graduation means additional pay if they en-

ter the military.

In fact, the military frequently complains that its disciplined retirees/graduates have difficulty adjusting in American society when they have the problem backwards. Thomas Ricks writes: “When they (the marines) went home for postgraduation leave... they seemed to experience a private loathing for public America.” (Ricks, 1997, p. 66). Their structure so much more closely resembles a well-ordered socialist society than any other entity in America. It is ironic that for years its arch-enemy was “communism” when it formed the most socialist-looking organization in the country. (Actually the Soviet states seemed to be something along the lines of oligarchic/autocratic, not communistic at all, but this distinction seems to be largely ignored, blurred, or unknown among America’s educated classes.) Low pay with high security is the lure offered by the tax-dollar rich department. Short working lives, decent pensions, good schooling and healthcare... these are managed benefits to which many, if not most, Americans are not privy. To reiterate, those who Ricks identifies as leaving the military to find society a problem-ridden wasteland of confusion and squalor have the situation backwards: Society could be like the military, disciplined, well structured, well administered, and extremely fair, covering basics, but opts instead to protect property and freedom, for whose success some must obviously be sacrificed. Again, it would appear to be a planned design, a preference.

The for-profit education business has evolved considerably in the past decade, though no one is certain that schooling will ever prove a money-making business. Edison Schools Inc. is the largest and most successful to date, running 113 schools nationwide. For-profit schools are usually the last resort for public schools with no way to meet budget demands, or for schools that feel they would be better off managed privately. However, projections indicate that even Edison will not turn a profit within the coming few years. (Schrag, 2001, p. 24) Edison seems to have discovered that money is required to make a business work, and while the public sector has been derided for years for failing to manage schools on meager budgets, Edison may be a strong indicator that it is not an easy task in these times. Teachers complain about long hours, parents worry that their curricula may not prepare their children well enough for secondary education, and above all, even with corporate donations (donations of a sense; the corporate donors are given stock options in return), Edison cannot quite manage yet. It would be interesting if private industry, without any hidden subsidies, could turn a profit with public education. Customarily, industries receive back-door subsidies, then claim an up-front victory for private endeavor. This is evident in many of America’s endeavors, semi-conductors being one of the most recent.

As Peter Sacks wrote recently: “The entire scheme (of education reform) is erected upon a pie-in-the-sky proposition: that turning public education into a pseudo-marketplace in which schools compete on the basis of “test scores” for their customers, i.e., parents and their children, will not only improve educational quality across the board but also wipe out the thorny achievement gaps between races and classes.” (Sacks, 2002, p. 30) So while ROTC, charter schools, for-profit schools, and vouchers offer alternatives to public schools, many public schools struggle to find ways to keep solvent. Some of them are shockingly hypocritical given the nature of school. In Oakland, California, for example, the District 11 Board of Education signed a contract with Coca-Cola to have vending machines installed with a clause that bonuses would be paid should machines sell in excess of 70,000 cases of soft drink. The

schools therefore encourage consumption of soft drinks on the school premises, a clear clash of public and private interest. The Superintendent even signed a memorandum to the school system, "From the Coke guy." (Manning, 1999, p. 17) There are other ways to raise money in similar fashion. A computer company agreed to give computers to a school... if the computers could run advertisements on part of the screen 24 hours a day. Once again, the students represent a market niche. Years ago, a representative from a large cereal manufacturer urged me to approach the Ministry of Education with free teaching materials for the English classroom, materials that promoted the company logo/product/etc. to an excessive extent. Not surprisingly, the Ministry of Education rejected the idea as being an outright conflict between public and private interests, and when the representative made a final plea, she said, "I just want the Japanese children to eat a decent breakfast!" This seems somewhat odd since the majority of their products contain considerable amounts of sugar, and the Japanese breakfast is most certainly healthier by comparison.

A tomato sauce manufacturer succeeded in the American school system with precisely this approach. Touting something called "The Scientific Method", Campbell's challenges, in its teaching materials, students to carry out "the slotted spoon experiment" to see whether its own sauce, Prego, is thicker than a competing sauce called Ragu. Remarkably, the teaching aids inform users that if Prego does not win, then the experiment has been done incorrectly. (Shenk, 1995, p. 52) The writer goes on to say that under-funded school systems will accept "free" teaching aids because their teachers are often under-trained and hungry for any materials that are readily applicable for the classroom. Furthermore, Prego takes aim at Ragu in this experiment mainly because it was trailing in market share at the time. 12,000 posters were distributed with coupons for free jars of sauce in the hope that advertising and brand loyalty could be worked through the school doors and into the classrooms.

It is clear what is happening. America's leading politicians make no effort to structurally alter education; President Clinton, after all, called for charter schools to increase from 400-500 to 3000 by 2000 (Vine, 1997, p. 11) In 1980, Ritalin was used by 270,000-541,000 children, a drug designed to help minimize the effects of disorders that are perceived to lower a child's school performance. By 1997, the drug was in use at a rate of seven times the earlier figure. Clearly, the system is driving parents to seek success. (Brooks, 2001, p. 44) However, in a speech made in Boulder, Colorado, Ralph Nader put the situation into perspective. Cities, in an effort to attract major league sports teams, often pass referendums to have their stadiums tax-financed. It is odd that such funding of stadiums and the attraction of foreign companies such as Daimler Chrysler in the mid-90s supercede health care and schools. After all, Nader points out that 45% of Americans have no health insurance, so while it is number one in health care spending, it cannot establish a system that is equitable. (Nader, 2000, speech text)

In the mid-1990s, I interviewed a JET program ALT who had been a teacher in New York City. She had been assigned to a battered school district in the Bronx, an elementary school, where she had hoped to apply her ideals in the world of education. In response to my question about suffering culture shock upon coming to Japan, she expressed surprise and replied, "This is nothing. Japan is a paradise. I worked in the Bronx." One day, she had decided to discuss the weekend with her 4th grade class to get to know them better. When she asked if anything special had happened, one girl said that her father had come home. When the teacher asked if he had been away on a business trip, the girl said that

no, he had been in prison. The incarceration rate in the United States is enormous. Approximately 1.8 million Americans are now in prison, a figure unparalleled anywhere in the world. (Schlosser, 1998, p. 52) This condition might reflect a lack of funding and attention paid to education.

On another occasion, there was a gun battle in front of her school. She told all of the students to get beneath their desks, as she had been trained to do. The most alarming aspect was that the elementary school 4<sup>th</sup> graders did so very matter-of-factly. They were not visibly disturbed by the violence occurring just outside of their school walls. Still, this situation does not appear to alarm many Americans. As long as these school systems serve the downtrodden in minority areas, the nation will appear content to neglect them. As long as funding is connected to property taxes, there will be a blatant discrepancy in what each school system receives. Increasingly sophisticated technology threatens to further widen this gap. It is pure logic that systems with access to computers and modern devices will easily outpace school systems whose money need go into roof repair.

Ruthie Brown, principal of Camden High, tells Jonathan Kozol: "I call it failure by design." (Kozol, 1991, p. 145) Or, as Kozol puts in his own words: "One searches for some way to understand why a society as rich, and frequently, as generous as ours would leave these children in their penury and squalor for so long- and with so little public indignation." (Kozol, 1991, p. 54) In other words, high school proficiency tests, gaps in Head Start funding, a test-driven curriculum, and a funding system that leaves city schools separate and unequal, can be called nothing but terribly unfair. Two towns in California, Baldwin Park and Beverly Hills, had budgets of \$595 per student and \$1244 per student. This difference is not only enormous, it is the norm. It is America. The children in America pledge allegiance to a flag- the country's flag. But again, to quote Kozol (1991, p. 212), the nation is hardly indivisible where education is concerned. Justice exists only for those who can purchase it. Local control does not express freedom; it expresses liberty for the funded, it denies any form of control in poor areas by rendering the system broken.

Just as Chomsky muses at the inequities in health care in America given the paradoxically enormous amounts of wealth the nation boasts and a lack of natural enemies, there are easy answers for better education. The solutions should be deconstructionist in nature. The solutions are not difficult to propose and implement; they would certainly be far easier than some of the very sophisticated weapon systems the government has labored to design. The F-22 was designed without a competitor in sight; \$72 billion dollars was allocated for the project (Zepezauer, 1996, p. 33), yet education is a tiny fraction of one defense project, and this for a plane that has no competitor. In other words, it is being built to outstrip the F-15, a plane that already represents the bulk of the American airforce. It is the premiere fighter jet in the world, but it is not an enemy's plane; it is an *American* plane. (If you are still unsure that you have read this correctly, let me phrase it differently: America is building a sophisticated, expensive jet to outdo its own fighter jet.) Again, a lack of action on the part of the federal government would seem to confirm that America the neo-liberalist economy is content with the present structure, for it could have been structurally altered long ago. Presidential candidates have learned, however, that slogans and platitudes are far easier and politically safer than raising/securing funds and taking action.

## BREAKDOWN IN JAPAN

Japan, on the other hand, has such equitable distribution of resources that the situation can almost seem unfair. Spacious schools on small islands harbor classrooms of four or five, but they are not short-changed merely because their population density is low. Japan's breakdown is far more complex in that the system seems plagued by inertia. Abe Kobo once compared Japan metaphorically to a ship called the *SS Labyrinth*, a slow-moving ship whose control room could not be located and whose direction could not be altered. Education, as the slow-moving ship, has not only hit stormy seas, but it would appear that no one is in the control room- or too many people too frequently take the controls.

Japan's current woes are depicted as economic: It is frequently cited as being mired in depression, when in fact, it has experienced fairly steady recession, but recession from a point of extreme wealth. During the late 1990s, after all, the country was said to have been holding half of the world's liquidity, mostly in the form of bank savings. (Sayle, p. 86)

Japan seems to have been unable to turn the boat following decades in a paradigm. The Cold War, which in a sense manifested itself in Japan with the outbreak of the Korean War, is what Yoshida Shigeru called, "a gift from the gods." (Horsley and Buckley, 1990, p. 51) Gore Vidal speculated that Japan had won the Cold War while the United States and the Soviet Union had both lost. (Vidal, 1995, p. 36) However, a shift in the stand-off between these superpowers left Japan with an export-oriented economy and an education system that seemed geared toward fueling that economy. Largely literate students could be counted upon for future molding; export-generated cash trickled down into a system that Murry Sayle called "familyism", the notion that cooperation allows for fair distribution in a brotherly way to fellow members of society. The rewards seemed great: Lifetime employment, increasing salaries per annum and ascending land values, an ever rosier future that prompted strongman Lee Kwan Yu to call Japan, "a prosperous, happy little country." (As opposed to Yu's draconian rich society, conjuring up images of prison cell blocks full of violators who dropped gum wrappers on the streets of Singapore.)

It would seem, then, that school breakdown was not the cause of society's problems. Rather, it is the result, or perhaps a by-product. Society has been changing in a multitude of ways, so perhaps it is the school system which actually turned out to be the *SS Labyrinth*, unable to alter direction, unable to adjust to changing conditions. Along with the riches came a gap in education. Schools continued to focus on their main goals: Not educating, but rather instructing and socializing. The socialization process and *kokoro* may have aimed at maintaining Japanese values and a sense of identity, but children had begun seeking refuge at home. Why not? Schools force hardships upon them that the home had eliminated. Computers assured children of state-of-the-art education while their classrooms promised 40 kids and largely rote instruction by adults who rarely leave schools- people whom the young started to look upon suspiciously as "fake adults" or school bodies. The teachers' devotion itself is not phony; in fact, it is part of the inflexibility of schools. At a conference in Romania in 1998, educators looked at my badge with disappointment. "We thought a real Japanese person was coming!" The Korean delegation commented, "How come we never see Japanese at these conferences?" In fact, their observation was accurate. I rarely see Japanese at international language teaching conferences. When I ask them

why, most give the usual litany of reasons: I had to be at school during the summer; my principal would not give me permission; if I go, the science teachers will find it unfair. Etc. This chain to the old paradigm is at odds with the modern world, and young people seem to be either confronting it or simply walking away from it.

Evidence to this effect abounds. Firstly, the number of school refusals increased markedly over the 90s. Academics like Hidaka Rokuro may identify this as a logical extension of *senshinkokubyou* (developed nation disease), and this affluence may help to explain how students are able to abandon school so easily, but the *why* is harder to explain. Students, from a young age, spend great deals of time on computers and learning with computers outside of school. At school, they are back to a pencil and paper. Furthermore, demographically, they are likely to have comfortable settings in which to recoil from school, often without siblings around in today's shrunken nuclear family. Even grandma and grandpa have opted for exile or been banished from many modern homes. As they hold much of the nation's wealth, independence in old age has become an option. Home schooling, a somewhat connected phenomenon, has experienced an increase as well, and even such a conservative body as the Ministry of Education is starting to recognize it as a viable alternative to simple *futoko* (truancy). 139,000 students stayed home from school in 2001, a record, while home schooling also established a record: 4000 students. (Lee, 2002, p. 32)

The young see not only fewer threats in abandoning the system, they see fewer rewards for sticking with it. Just as Bill Clinton warned Americans that they would be shifting jobs several times during their lifetimes and that education would be their trump card in staying ahead (again, one of ex-President Clinton's pet diversionary tactics was to shift the blame for not improving education to the individual by scaring them), Prime Minister Obuchi, just prior to his death, issued a similar such warning in a newspaper article that appeared in the *International Herald Tribune*.

The economic system that we call globalization may have worked in the Cold War paradigm, but Japan appears to have been both a winner and a loser. The Industrial Revolution, in retrospect, brought us greater mobility and the availability of goods. The railroad, the telegraph, and better, cheaper products became widely available. This spectacular boom, as with most fast growth periods, was followed by a terrible economic bust. The Information Revolution, on the other hand, offered few accomplishments of any note. In fact, it has revealed the true problem we face this time: surplus goods, a lack of necessary employment, and an ever-growing disparity in wealth that leaves many unable to purchase the surplus. Few connect this economic climate to education, but it may have strong bearing. Education encourages development, participation, and the pursuit of aspirations. The young appear to sense that school- within the framework of society as it currently plods along- will not help many of them in any significant sense. The ratio of jobs available to job hunters for graduates at the secondary level hit 0.72. This figure has never been worse since records have been kept. (Asahi Shinbun, 2002, p. 22)

On October 12, 2000, an interesting program entitled *Kaisha wo Yameteiru Wakamono* aired. The comments were telling of this generation. One young man said that while the salaries at the large companies are rather good, the sacrifice in terms of time and quality of life does not make it worth it. Others indicated that *senpai* encouraged them to coast along until they could one day pick up large salaries and have responsibility. The older generation does not offer many role models for the young, it would

seem. Since the younger generation does not feel that it has much to contribute, rather than wait for their turn in large companies, young people are declining to enter. This may result in a domestic-generated “brain drain”; whereas many Indians, Africans, and Chinese were lured to the IT industry with better salaries in North America and Europe, these talented young people may be turned away by the internal structure. I asked a young man, a graduate of a good university, why he quit his job with Toyota after just four years. He responded that he wanted to enjoy life, and that the position with Toyota did not give him this option. He became a real-life embodiment of the film industry’s Tora-san, the *furita* (a free-lance worker of part-time jobs).

Many young people are disillusioned by the future burden they know they will need to carry: the graying population. It is predicted that the population will shrink to 109 million by 2050 (United Nations estimate); just like their American counterparts, the Japanese youth are antsy about caring for this enormous battalion of elderly people. In fact, perhaps more so than young people in the United States given a history largely devoid of immigration. Mobility, too, has not come to the economic system. Salaries are low, so young people postpone marriage- and children. The top-heavy economy ensures that young people will continue to need time to stabilize their lives. Recent government policies have not helped to instill confidence in young people, either. A proposed cap on insurance for savings accounts (at ¥10,000,000) may encourage old people to part with more money, but it could also discourage young people from saving. Likewise, the publicly-discussed negative interest rate bank accounts for the future likewise suggest to young people that in various ways, they will be squeezed for the welfare of older people.

Socially, Japan has changed immensely. The economy has shifted from heavy to light industry; it has undertaken “internationalization”, an internal/external process of linking itself more strongly with the outside world. A decade ago, just six million Japanese went abroad. Prior to September 11, 2001, the figure had doubled. Yet unlike the Ikeda Hayato years of promise (income-doubling), the young seem more like the couple from Kurosawa Akira’s early film *Subarashiki Nichiyoubi*, in which a young couple in love is unable to get a start in life and senses that the system is rigged against them. Or it may be an existentialist dilemma. In *Kokoro*, the Natsume Soseki novel, the teacher swims far out from the masses of black heads in the water near the shore, lamenting that he has to return. This conjures up a Meiji period dilemma that still exists: Individual vs. collective concerns.

Both modernization/affluence and internationalization have affected the current generation as well, it would seem. Endo Shusaku complained that today’s advertisers were far more enigmatic than the *kempeitai*. They have successfully brainwashed a generation. Alex Kerr speculates that the young have a very limited history in terms of literature due to changes in kanji. The works of Ogai Mori and Soseki Natsume are disappearing from high school textbooks. (Asahi Shinbun, August 21, 2002, p. 22)

It would appear that the school curriculum is opting less and less to expose students to these writers. The Asahi suggests this may lead to deterioration in both language proficiency and the capacity for thinking. Young people seldom know the films of Ozu Yasujiro or Mizoguchi Kenji, but they are certain to know Hollywood blockbusters. In fact, in a discussion class, I polled students’ favorite films: 23 of 23 were American. There was not a single Japanese film among the favorites, though several expressed pride in Japanese works of animation.

Still, parents seem to aim for the proverbial treadmill in terms of structured activity. I spoke with the parents of a returnee student who felt their child was not being challenged enough. Despite clear indications that she could not handle the work in an advanced class at a Saturday language maintenance program, she was moved up at the parents' insistence. Already at the age of ten she had taken an EIKEN Step Test, and they were hoping to build her up for future exams. (She eventually toppled a level at the age of eleven.) At a station in Ibaraki (Ueno Park as well), there are signs forbidding skate boarding and mountain bike riding. However, in Ueno Park, nobody has tried to prevent the scores of retired people who set up badminton nets and play at will, or the annoying throngs of elderly who gather to croon to traditional instruments at dawn.

Perhaps today's youth is being pushed too hard and at the same time they are being over-regulated. School refusals have climbed to a new high; at the elementary school level, the explanation frequently offered is that they simply prefer to stay home. This may indicate a problem in Japan: There is a gap between the way students learn at home and how they learn at school as well. This may be one of the great dangers that has gone unidentified with the Internet. Children may fail to see little point in going to school. Abe Mariko, 16, dropped out of school five years ago due to difficulties adjusting. With Kumon worksheets and correspondence school support, she is ahead of her peers in average scores. (Lee, 2002, p 32) In her case, social problems drove her out of the school system. Perhaps schools need to become places where children feel they belong, and where they find a supportive environment. In her case she did not. Schools used to be the main centers of information; they are no longer. In his work, *Education of the Rising Sun*, Okamoto argues that attitude and value are emphasized in elementary and secondary education. (Okamoto, 1992, p. 36) The key emphasis in education is "*kokoro*", and developing good Japanese, as opposed to cultivating skills and developing abilities. However, society's young are becoming more learner-independent. They can isolate themselves more easily. Schools will need to focus less on the ideological synthesizing of good workers for the state, a post World War goal, and more on humanizing.

According to a report issued by the National Institute for Educational Policy Research in October, 2001, 32.4% of the 6,614 elementary school teachers they polled said their schools had at least one classroom that had "collapsed." (French, 2002, p. 1) Half of all secondary school teachers reported violence, higher dropout rates, and problems such as teenage prostitution. Ogi Naoki, an education expert said, "Up until now, Japan was a society in which children obeyed adults. This relationship no longer works because it was built around the idea that by doing well in a school you could enter a good company and have lifetime security. Over the last twenty years, however, Japan hasn't found a way out of its economic depression and from the children's viewpoint, the academic record-oriented system has collapsed." (French, 2002, p. 4)

Interestingly, one principal, Yamada Chuji, pointed a finger at the parents. Because of their current tendencies to give children money, cell phones, and spending less time with them, the teaching of manners and other social skills have become the duty of schools. (French, 2002, p. 6) Other teachers like to point to understaffing or lack of continuing education opportunities for teachers as a problem. Like most universities, the one at which I am employed is dark at night, instead of offering the employed courses to upgrade their skills and abilities. When a summer course was offered for language

teachers to hone their abilities in teaching communicative language skills, most confessed that they neither had training nor learned about communicative teaching as university students.

## HUMANIZING THE SCHOOLS

It would appear that teaching, first, needs humanizing. Rather than going into schools at age 22 and spending the bulk of their lives there until they retire, teachers should be traveling, studying, and learning skills at university. Better prepared and trained teachers would better adapt, it would seem, to the diversifying conditions in which the young find themselves thrashing. The Ministry of Education has responded by offering such innovations as leave without pay, but whether the system will be able to offer further flexibility remains to be seen.

The OECD reported that Japan headed its list of school systems in an international comparison, but this was probably due to the fact that Japan achieved a certain level of GDP with a relatively low amount of money spent on education in an economic comparison. Perhaps the old paradigm of Ikeda Hayato's meritocratic society is outdated; without lifetime employment or even gainful conditions for the younger generation, incentives may be low for students to succeed in school. The stagnation of the economy may represent a lack of flexibility in moving out of this Cold War paradigm; education may simply be following. The time to change would seem to have come. Okamoto wrote in his study that companies in Japan wanted students with strong basic skills, but wished to train them within their firms, something that could be done largely thanks to low job mobility. (Okamoto, 1992, pp. 49-50) These conditions have since changed. Japanese higher education has responded to the needs of industry, but as the export-driven model disappears, education must shift.

Mori Arinori said in 1885 that, "Education is not intended to produce people accomplished in techniques of the arts and sciences, but rather to manufacture persons required by the State." (Duke, 1989, p. 56) By this logic, Japan has been mired in the manufacture-people-for-state model longer than many seem to think. However, the reasons for a breakdown in the system are numerous and varied. Teruhisa Horio suggests that examinations and a *gakureki shakai* lie behind the breakdown. There is a backwash effect after elementary school, resulting in teachers' tendency to teach to tests. Various pressures from parents to principals make this virtually compulsory. This led Esaki Leo, a Nobel Prize winner and former University of Tsukuba president, to write that teachers had been turned into manufacturers, and that the Fundamental Law of Education of 1947 had lost its value completely. The late Miyamoto Masao claims that interpersonal relations in Japan, bullying in particular, serve to force young people to submit to collectivism.

In terms of *gakkyu houkai*, many of the above-mentioned figures might see the current dilemma as a liberation rather than a breakdown. Thomas Jefferson once said that the young had to rebel; it was part of a natural process of restructuring that which was not right. Perhaps the tendency for the young to rebel is such an expression of dissatisfaction with the current system. Several years ago, the Ministry of Education's Central Council issued recommendations to parents regarding school refusal: Read to children more. Have meals together. Talk together more often. These may seem shockingly simplistic, but they formed the bulk of the ministry's advice to befuddled educators and parents. Further-

more, counselors were dispatched to schools along with retired people, PTA members, and others to help contain the problem of school refusal and school breakdown. Such measures may help counter the current malaise, but it does not appear to strike at the source of the trouble.

## **ATTACKING THE PROBLEM OF BREAKDOWN**

Solutions are, of course, difficult to apply because the problem is so complex in the case of Japan. In the case of the United States, the problem should be far easier to deal with since the source of the problem is more easily identified. However, it would appear that an equitable solution would be undesirable, as society would be rid of its stratification and the 20%-with-80% of the wealth configuration would likely be jeopardized.

What exactly does “stemming school breakdown” entail? If one accepts that society itself is breaking down, then it might require staffing by larger and more dynamic numbers of young people. In breaking with OECD praise, smaller numbers of students in classrooms could be a start. At present, many young parents seem attracted to private education by this feature. Furthermore, private schools generally emphasize special directions not offered by public schools. They are responding flexibly to perceived interests; public schools could pursue this, but they appear to be inexorably trapped in the wake of the SS Labyrinth.

It is said that instruction in Japanese schools is superb; education is not. Teacher training needs to reflect greater diversity in terms of student assessment and participation. It follows that if students learn in more diverse ways, assessment should change to accurately judge performance. Testing should be part of assessment, but should not define it. (Perrone, 1991, p. 24) Students cannot be expected to sit through lectures and learn by rote memorization. Massive amounts of hours of TV and independent participation with video games have helped shift the mindset of the young. They need to be engaged in education, not simply be passive participants.

Teaching to the middle with slight preference given to the bottom could be altered with smaller classes. In fact, smaller classroom enrollment not only offers greater flexibility, it attracts people. One parent told me that he registered his daughter as residing with an elderly couple in the center of Tokyo because his daughter could then attend school there. The public school, well-staffed and with the same decent facilities found everywhere, is underutilized due to its location. He argues that rather than sending his daughter to the local school in his suburban area, she can take advantage of the city, its obvious cultural offerings, and the low resident population density there.

At present, a considerable amount of energy and time have been devoted to diversifying and altering education at the elementary school level. On the contrary, elementary schools with their long hours, diverse programs, pell-mell environments, and *joie de vivre* scarcely seemed to require overhauling; rather, it should have been the high school curriculum. Greater variety is needed in certain areas; math, for example. Elective subjects that reflect contemporary interests might help stem desertion. However, the hybrid nature of the high school remains a thorny problem. Its curriculum and goals resemble the academic high school of Europe, yet its all-encompassing nature suggests strong similarity with the American system. (Duke, 1986, p. 210) The sorting of slow and fast learners is

done on a mass scale rather than within the schools. This suggests that a major reform stroke could help set the system in order, alleviate pressures at the junior high school level, and create stronger social bonds which the country seems to need.

The high school entrance examination could be eliminated. It not only severs childhood friendships, but puts pressure on both teachers and students to succeed on an exam that separates. Afterwards, students may have to commute long distances, another potentially debilitating consequence of high school life. Regarding the above-mentioned socialization process, it would appear that stronger ongoing interaction between the sexes might be desirable as well. Dying rural communities, too, need a strong and enduring base from which to stem atrophy. Scattering youth at the age of 15 may not be in the country's best interests. Technology, for one, could be used to offer classes not available in certain areas, especially rural areas. I have seen efforts by JR to offer lower-priced train fares to residents of outlying rural areas. My guess is that such policies help stem urban migration by offering residents of distant areas access to the city. Technology could bring courses for which instructors are lacking to those areas. Naturally, such courses and the accompanying technology could be made available at substantial discounts, even with public subsidies (recall American piecemeal funding; in Japan's case, the opposite tact could be employed). The rationale is multifold: Schools need to update and upgrade; the economy needs a boost, and schools could certainly provide this; rural flight needs to be stemmed if Japan is to alleviate its obvious problem with urban congestion and the problems that accompany.

In another effort to offer lifelong education to rural areas, high schools could be kept open in evenings for the public to take courses. Retired people, whose talents and abilities run wide, could make an excellent source of instructors. Children need not see schools as institutions that keep them during the day; they should view them as ongoing bodies of learning, they should see adults streaming in at night to learn cooking, automotive repair, languages, literature, etc. It further addresses another problem chronic in Japan: there are few places for young people to socialize. From a young age, few chances are given the young for meeting members of the opposite sex. It is a problem given modes of interaction in Japanese society.

People often watch celebrities on TV here and talk about them as if they were their own family. It is yet another example of how the lives of people are channeled into banal areas of total unimportance. Education should seek to develop and enrich the lives of Japan's citizenry, not train them for posts into which they are slotted for 40 years of long work and limited diversity. Perhaps a Faustian bargain is being undone. The economic miracle of Japan produced a cash-rich society, but as Mishima lamented through his character Honda in *Runaway Horses*, perhaps Japan's relentless pursuit of economic superiority caused the breakdown, and education is merely suffering in the wake of that breakdown whose consequences were cosmetically coated by material gain.

Teacher training to achieve the above would scarcely be difficult to organize. Japan has built an intricate system of education centers throughout the country; they are well equipped and could be outfitted to pursue the task of humanizing education to a greater extent. It would, of course, take money, but education is an area of Keynesian thrust. Unlike weapon systems, which sit idle, education is economically dynamic. The potential benefits of diversifying and enriching education at this critical stage in time should be all too evident. If education centers were to coordinate with universities, both prac-

tical skill development and liberal arts education could become part of a nationwide education renaissance. Teacher training could of course be expanded to further diversify as well. The overall aim is to strengthen communities and help invigorate them.

Given modes of social interaction, the young need greater opportunities to interact with those in their community. One group that springs to mind is the elderly- war veterans in particular. Visits to schools, local excursions, exposure to real-life skills- these are vital in restructuring the modern classroom; pumping students with data and input so that they can compete on tests is an outdated and pointless approach. Japan cannot hope to regain its edge as a leading exporter; much of the world's capital, for better or worse, is finding its way into China. (This author would argue that this is for the worse; in the past decades, at least some flexibility has been maintained with a score of countries competing to supply through export-driven economies. The dangers of leaving export to one colossal nation remain as of yet unknown. Furthermore, the classical model of development given excessive global surplus portends danger in a multitude of ways, but these will not be explored at any length in this paper given the complexity of the variables.) Classrooms need to adopt such approaches as free classroom discussion. Students need to share their interests and opinions more often; since the school may not be the chief source of information any longer it should command the respect of young people in other ways, participation being one of them.

Parents, too, need to be drawn into school. Given current drawbacks and hardships concerning child rearing, it would appear that many educated people are refraining from multiple childbirth. The lesser educated, however, appear to be supplying the bulk of the children. It is said that many young people lack the skills to be effective parents; perhaps courses for them should exist given the ostensible proliferation of this trend.

Counselors are provided for problem students, but how are problem parents helped? In other systems, parents are voted onto school boards to participate. Parents could be given strong voices in the development of school curricula and programs, but this would require some liberalization of the national curriculum.

The school system, it would seem, has not suffered in the area of academics, rather it suffers social breakdown. Education has aimed at inputting basic skills for the benefit of the workforce; *juku* have helped further the academic skills of some while the workplace has been responsible for the final molding of the masses. Hence, the OECD, in bestowing the honor of number one on Japan in its international assessment, failed to look in a key closet: *Juku* have been responsible for doing much of the educating, and these costs are not calculated in the total. Sweden and France's lavish spending may not seem so outlandish when the costs of the private sphere are calculated into the aggregate.

The Central Council for Education released a report in November, 2002 calling for the Fundamental Law of Education to be revised. Like the Americans with their empty platitudes, this well-intentioned measure will doubtless prove toothless given the problems in the education sphere. Specific ways to achieve the aims outlined in the law are needed rather than simply tinkering with the language. No one doubts that sturdy and compassionate Japanese are needed for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The full development of personality, the dignity of individuals, and the love of one's country are certainly important as aims, but more important is HOW teachers can help their students achieve these aims.

What is seen as breakdown in Japan might be interpreted by some as a quiet revolution. Rather than teach to the economic juggernaut, perhaps Japan's unraveling will allow it to humanize further. By disengaging itself from the factory and reacquainting itself with the community, education may be positioning itself to lead Japan through years certain to be full of turmoil and tumult as the globe tries to come to grips with ecological crisis exacerbated by economic chaos and social transformation. Hence, Japan's school chaos may merely serve as a signal of times to come.

## **SOLVING PROBLEMS IN AMERICA**

America has truly become a nation at risk, but not because of the alarms signaled in its 1983 report. Recalling Bill Clinton's efforts to overhaul healthcare, education would need either remarkably strong leadership or extremely quiet implementation to prevent education from pejorative defeat. National education needs to be presented to the public as an investment, much in the same way Japan's humanistic transformation could serve as a signal of changing times. For one, overcoming the concept of tax would be difficult. Americans have changed little since their forefathers painted their faces and tossed crates of tea into Boston Harbor. The word "tax" is still met with suspicion. However, both "tax" and "public domain" will need some lexicographic promoting if the public at large is to accept federal education.

"The dominant American attitude toward schooling these days, embodied in all these changes, is a fundamentally new level of distrust," writes Deborah Meier. (Sacks, 2002, p. 30) In postmillennium America, in fact, the concept of teaching and schooling as human-centered endeavors appears to be desiccating. Kids are treated more frequently as products who are trained to serve the needs of American industry. Just as it was said following the Cold War that the Soviets were getting to be more free while the Americans went more communist, Japan and America seem to be oddly rotating one half turn in pursuit of each other's system. What hybrid emerges remains to be seen, but the Clinton administration and Bush, firmly in tow, seem to be after the inimical elements of Japanese education: standardized testing, serving industry, bureaucratic control, and longer school years.

Fair funding would require a new approach to raising money for education. Since the United States has proved that it can allocate enormous sums for such endeavors as weapons purchase, raising tax money for education should not prove problematic. A federal department of education could limit its role largely to equitable distribution of funding, and some element of the department could concern itself with basic needs in terms of curricula and training. There are models worthy of emulation. The Agricultural Extension Service, begun in the early 1900s, has used federal funds to promote agricultural development in the United States. It has worked extremely well at both the national and state levels, and there seems to be no reason why education could not benefit from a similar such department. (Note that the U.S. military has a similar network of training centers.)

Such a department could be headed by a board of appointed officials whose function would be not to govern over, but oversee the education system as a whole. Like Supreme Court judges, they would oversee the administration of national standards to which local needs and concerns would aspire. Central Education Academies, something very similar to Japan's network of education centers, would

serve as the institutions for training and retraining teachers. (Comer, 1997, pp. 193-198) Administrators would train there as well, and funding for them would be proportionately equal. Working in tandem with universities and researchers, these centers would help mold education for the country.

It sounds expensive and dangerously open to manipulation. However, given the \$157 billion bailout paid for the S & L scandal, it is nothing. With a fair and democratic entity in place, something without strong central control in terms of implementation, schools could become community centers rather than institutions of disparate merit. Those communities requiring additional functions would receive proportionately more funding. For example, some may have to serve as day-care centers after school in low-income areas. Particularly where nutrition is scandalously dodgy, schools would serve meals. Child poverty and malnutrition have never been dealt with on any significant scale; quite often, as with President-select Bush, religious organizations were encouraged to take the lead in providing such services. Since the free-market system and private industry have proven totally inept at eliminating what should have been an easy problem, a centrally organized education system should be given a crack at it.

The schools, in their newly found role as community pillar, would also serve as lifelong learning centers. Funding could be provided as necessary, though with an enormous swelling of the aged ranks anticipated, a low-cost teaching corps would seem to be on the horizon.

Foremost among problems would be mass-media's (on behalf of the corporate sector) blitz to depict such a plan, or any similar to it, as outrageously expensive, dangerous, and un-American (to the point of being "communist.") Upper-middle to upper class America would balk at forfeiting their privileges, again cloaked in the language of "liberty" and "loss of freedom", terms that will make little sense to those children, one in six, who live in poverty today. Privilege works like insurance for certain classes, and this playing field needs leveling.

## CONCLUSION

Accountability implies mistrust, or a lack of trust. America appears to be on a path to complex diversion. It does not have any faith in its people to run its institutions, so the country is awash in choices. ROTC, charter schools, vouchers, home schooling, gay high schools, company-generated materials, etc. Rather than address its fundamental problem- inequity- it chooses a bizarre interpretation of the word "freedom." Class differences divide America, though it strives hard to paint a picture of unity, and education upholds the differences through diversion.

An American teacher once related an insightful story in the late 1990s. The school was supposed to give yet another in a battery of tests to its pupils, and for several days prior, this teacher coached them on how to fill in the computer cards so that they could score as high as possible on the tests (by avoiding technical pitfalls.) On their practice sheets, the teacher would frequently warn them with such admonitions as, "Darken circles" written on adhesive page markers and then attached to the papers.

On the day of the test, the examinations were distributed. The students had to write on one of President Clinton's favorite themes: Should school uniforms be adopted in public schools? At the end

of the test, one boy asked, "What did you write about?" to a neighbor, whereby the instructor, alarmed, told him that everyone had had the same topic. "Not mine. There was a little paper attached that said 'Dancin' circles.' That's what I wrote on."

As Mr. Ferri related, somewhere in a distant test center, someone was going to grade hundreds upon hundreds of essays on school uniforms, and then come upon just one that had been written on "Dancin' Circles." If the evaluator did not burst out laughing, wrote Ferri, then all hope was lost for education. (Ferri, 1998, pp.16-17)

A yet sadder account illustrates the problem with a high school class in Camden, New Jersey. A boy is asked if he liked the book they were reading, *A Tale of Two Cities*. When he answers 80% of it, the journalist asks why he didn't like the other 20%. The boy answered smugly, "1/5 of the pages in my book were missing. But I was one of the lucky ones who got one."

Indeed, the Bush administration's education agenda is a festering extension of every administration's education agenda from *A Nation at Risk* to present. The 1983 document did not alert the country to a nation at risk; rather, it has helped everybody to further ensure that the risk will remain. As failed schools are branded with scarlet letters and nobody comes up with funding to ameliorate an unjust system, you can be certain that contrary to President-select Bush's assertion, plenty of children will be left behind. Vaclav Havel decried societies bent on looking for new scientific recipes, new ideologies, new control systems, and new institutions for improving education (Postman, 1996, p. 24) America's elite and political classes will continue to encourage them because they divert and help to keep a broken down system in tact. Louis Brandeis, a Supreme Court justice, once said, "Those who own the country ought to govern it." That, it would seem, is happening, and those who own it would appear content with what they have in place.

Japan's state of breakdown may reflect inertia and inability to respond flexibly to social changes, yet change may be coming slowly, and perhaps for the better. A ministry of education official once explained, in response to my question about why they did not advertise their success with housing grants to its *buraku* outcasts in efforts to eliminate discrimination, that the government preferred not to raise the issue publicly. With education, one might hope that education is undergoing a quiet revolution.

The Japanese education system was once the envy of the Americans: "Education is used as a powerful instrument of national policy, and schools inculcate into young Japanese the importance of harmony and cooperation with others. School reflects this cultural priority." (Horsely and Buckley, 1990, p. 216) Indeed, this may have been the formula for fueling an export-driven economy, but the familyism and cooperation appear to have desiccated with the relocation of manufacturing plants overseas. Japan's social capitalism seems to be coming unraveled, and with it, a society that was constructed quite fairly in comparison with most.

Japan's society is coming apart in a variety of respects. Education has not spurred these changes; rather, it has refused to cope with them or recognize them. How will the Ministry of Education manage the chaos? One would hope that education would return to its aims as outlined in a copy of the Course of Study from the 1950s. It encouraged teachers to work together to improve their lot and to teach children based on the perceived needs of the area. In other words, to recognize the differences

and to cultivate them. This pursuit implies extensive trust in its teachers and local systems. This is precisely the opposite of current trends in American education.

It would appear that both could learn a great deal from the other, but as of late, the wrong elements have been swapped. The ecological problems that face the planet are too numerous to delve into here, but it is such problems that will bring humankind to its greatest crisis: the threat of extinction. Nations, rather than strive to build economic powerhouses that lead us toward the fatal precipice, should focus instead on developing education systems that cultivate creative, critical thinking skills and abilities to help the young of today develop more civic and cooperative societies. Both societies need to reconsider their education systems. America continues to strive for economic superiority by educating a segment of its society excellently. Japan strives to educate its society for economic power in a paradigm that is clearly inconsistent with the resources available and population growth the planet faces.

A Japanese saying cites children as being the present generation's treasure. In a sense, in a global environment, the children are everyone's treasures. This generation, however has brought the youth of today one step closer toward extinction. It is critical that education systems change in tandem with global economics and social conditions. Perhaps time has caught up with the Japanese education system while it is definitely time for the American system to change. This investment in more humanistic systems will ensure that there will be treasures for ensuing generations.

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