PROCEEDINGS 05 133–138
March 2009

Junior High School Students' Interests and Expectations for Occupations:

Focusing on Academic Performance and Gender

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Abstract

This paper will discuss junior high school students' views on occupations, focusing on their "interests" and "expectations." In this survey, I prepared a list of 18 occupations in accordance with occupational prestige scores and asked students the following two questions: What occupation are you interested in? What do you think you will be able to really become? The former question is related to "interests" and the latter to "expectations." The purpose of this paper is to analyze students' views on occupations, with a particular focus on the disparities between gender and academic performance. It also aims to recommend methods for future career education in Japan. As a result, the students' views on occupations differ by gender. An occupation with high prestige is considered one that provides a high income and a strong sense of power, which is desired by everyone. In contrast, the occupational prestige of jobs in which students are interested is at the middle level, such as entertainer, hairstylist, or chef. Students are interested in jobs that require technical knowledge, not in jobs that require long-term education or training. This seems to indicate that students may not consider a school education as something of great importance.

Key words: Career education, gender, academic performance, occupational aspiration, transition

Introduction

Many researchers point out that since the late 1990s, the impact of the hierarchy of schools on students' career choices has changed. According to Brinton (2000), due to the decreasing number of 18-year-olds in the population, the diversified entrance examination of universities, and the reduction of the labor market for high school graduates, schools' ability to motivate their students to study seriously, as well as the trust students place in the school to help them find employment, have weakened.

In addition, those current situations have weakened the impact of the tracking system on students' career choices and have affected the extent of students' commitment to their school lives. At the same time, other studies show that current educational reform has also weakened the power of the tracking system to influence students' career choices. For example, Kariya (2001) points out that the new educational policy of a "more relaxed" education and an education based on "a new view of academic performance," which have been practiced since 1980s, have exposed the impact of social stratification. These educational reforms have made the goals and criteria of education more complicated and subjective, including elements such as children's desires, interests, and concerns, along with "the discovery and solution of the problem." The goals and criteria of education were more visible before the reform, as they largely consisted of academic performance measured by examination (Kariya, 2001, pp. 18-19). As a result, the pressure on students to study has weakened (p. 18). Instead, social categories such as social class and gender have further affected academic performance and aspirations. The types of people who possess particular job aspirations should be examined, looking beyond academic achievement and educational attainment. In this paper, I will examine this issue, focusing particularly on gender.

Research on the Differentiation of Women's Career Choices

Since the mid-1980s, many scholars in school sociology have pointed out that gender role norms have a strong impact on Japanese children's desire to pursue certain occupations and career choices. Nakanishi (1998) examined several factors outside of school, such as role norms within society, the labor market, and family culture, along with the mechanisms inside schools, which may affect women's career formation. She also pointed out that although the school system does not rely on ascription institutionally, gender roles are still taught in

the "hidden curriculum." In addition, Marxist feminists have pointed out that sexism is reproduced within schools along with the requirements of capitalism, even though schools should be an apparatus for selection and distribution; in particular, they claim that the inequalities of social stratification and gender are produced through the severe selective processes of the competition for academic performance and attainment (e.g., Kimura, 1999).

The existing studies on the differentiation of women's career choices assume that school culture has a strong impact on students under the "severe competition of academic performance and attainment." While girls are forced to compete academically, they also receive message about gender roles that conflict with academic success, leading them to a dilemma. This female-oriented difficulty is a phenomenon particular to the "mass education society" of the 1990s (Kariya, 1995). Nevertheless, although existing gender studies have criticized the school as an apparatus of inequality, the decline of the function of selection and distribution through severe competitions, the rise of the parentocracy, and the separation of job aspirations from the meritocracy may produce a new problem, which gender studies expect to tackle.

Meanwhile, transformations within the meritocracy-such as changes in school culture and student culture and the weakening of the school hierarchy's course regulation power-have brought about the following new problems. Mimizuka (2006) suggested that a family's education strategy, as it corresponds to the regional educational environment, brings a definite difference to children's scholastic attainment formation process, and this situation may lead to the problem of a parentocracy. Terasaki (2008) who analyzed a regulated factor of junior high school student's educational and occupational aspirations, pointed out the following two factors based on this suggestion. First, the influence of attribute factors, especially gender, is greater than the influence of achievement factors, such as academic performance and effort, on both educational and occupational aspirations. Second, the correlation between educational aspirations and occupational aspirations is relatively low.

Researchers have previously thought that when a person obtained high academic performance, that person would be able to go on to a good high school, enter a good university, and get a job in a good company. Now, the explanatory power of this model has weakened in the regions in which attribute factors, such as gender and family strength in the economy, have a major impact on children's academic performance. The occupations into which junior high school students want to enter in the future have come to be decided by methods besides academic performance and educational aspirations. Thus, aside from academic achievement and educational attainment, the question of who has what occupational views and aspirations becomes a new problem that must be examined now.

The Development of Career Education in Japan

Recently, the transition from school to work has extended and lost stability. In this respect, the process of transition has been recognized not as one way to go from being a youth to an adult, but as a "trajectory" that has a multi-dimensional, complex structure[1]. Due to the complexity of the transition, career planning has become more important in terms of individual choice. Some insist that individuals should learn appropriate skills. This tendency is found in the current situation surrounding career education in Japan. A report entitled "Promoting the education for cultivating the stud ents' view of a career and work (research report)" by the Guidance and Counseling Research Center, National Institute for Education Policy Research of Japan in 2002, notes repeatedly that it is important "for each child to get appropriate views of occupations and labor." It is worth remembering the shift in the style of guidance from "career counseling," in which students are supposed to choose their attainment level, to "career education," in which students are expected to self-actualize through the choice of an occupation and/or through the occupation itself. This shift would have more significant meanings, rather than mere changes of name or direction. The outcomes should be sufficiently examined.

In the following sections, I examine 1) the situation surrounding job consciousness, which is a significant developmental theme in career education, using the data on junior high school students, and 2) problems regarding career education. Most existing studies on job consciousness focus on high school students and college students because they study student aspiration for social status attainment (e.g., Katase, 2005; Mimizuka, 2007). In contrast, this study focuses on junior high school students, both because the current policy on career education emphasizes elementary and junior high schools and because it is important to examine the process of career development as opposed to career choices.

Junior High School Students' Job Consciousness

This report is based on the Japan Education Longitudinal Study 2006 (JELS 2006) conducted by Ochanomizu University, which investigated many aspects of children's development from elementary school through their first job. The sample comprised 915 ninth grade junior high school students who live in a rural area

north of Tokyo.

In our survey, we prepared a list of 18 occupations in accordance with occupational prestige scores, and asked students the following two questions: What occupation are you interested in? What do you think you will be able to really become? The former question is related to "interests" and the latter to "expectations."

Occupation prestige indicates the "general goodness" or "general desirability" of a given job (e.g., Goldthorpe & Hope, 1972). It can also be expressed as "general standing" or "social standing." It is prestige not of the individual, but of the occupation itself, which is not a concrete individual occupation but a typified occupation. Talcott Parsons asserted that prestige is a hierarchical ordering of the esteem reward. Although hierarchy and prestige are not identical-technically, hierarchy is composed of a rank of prestige-we can here regard a prestige as a hierarchy. Thus, the examination of children's occupational interests with special attention paid to occupational prestige is the equivalent of researching children's interests and anticipations within the hierarchical social movement. In other words, researching occupational interests means researching a social movement from an individual angle. The 18 occupations in our study are as follows: doctor, attorney, professor, scientist, entertainer, teacher, police officer, carpenter, nursery staff, office clerk, chef, hairdresser, car mechanic, baker, painter, retail sales staff, cleaner, road crew.

Table 1 shows the percentage of occupations of "interest" and of "expectation" by gender. Again, "interests" indicate jobs in which students are interested, and "expectations" indicate jobs that students really think they can get. The occupational prestige differs based on the society, culture, and living environment of each country. In Japan, "doctor" and "attorney" are highest ranked, "office clerk" falls near the middle, and "retail sales staff" and "road crew" fall at the low end.

This table exhibits three notable concepts. First, there are some occupations that exhibit little difference in interest between boys and girls as well as occupations with a great difference between boys and girls. Boys show a high interest in "carpenter," "car mechanic," and "painter," while girls showed a high interest in "nursery staff," "hairdresser," and "retail sales staff." As we can see, occupational interests differ greatly between boys and girls. According to an actual labor market, the occupations in which girls are interested are the occupations in which women are actually most engaged; therefore, children are choosing occupations that anticipate the gender-segregated labor market into which they will enter.

Second, jobs with high occupational prestige are generally thought of as desirable by all students; yet, junior high school students are more interested in jobs with middle-level occupational prestige, such as entertainer, hairdresser, and chef. This means that junior high school students' occupational interests are shaped by factors other than the level of occupational prestige scores. The occupations with a high level of prestige tend to require long-term education and training, but students seem more interested in jobs that require technical knowledge instead. Children might think that long-term education is troublesome, or they might still be growing familiar with the occupations around them. In any case, this is one of the issues that should be ardently considered when studying students' occupational

Table 1 "Interests" and "Expectations" by Gender (%)

	occupational prestige score	Interests		Expectations	
		boys	girls	boys	girls
doctor	90.1	30.8	31.5	8.6	10.6
attorney	86.9	29.0	26.9	9.1	5.6
professor	84.3	18.9	12.7	8.2	5.6
scientist	72.0	49.1	24.9	16.2	9.9
entertainer	69.0	48.1	46.0	16.0	14.2
teacher	63.6	27.8	23.0	18.2	18.3
police officer	57.9	43.7	24.5	20.2	11.2
carpenter	53.1	43.2	7.2	33.5	9.5
nursery staff	52.9	30.4	65.4	21.7	49.4
office clerk	52.2	36.7	40.9	40.4	42.2
chef	51.6	48.4	62.8	26.2	29.1
hairdresser	49.7	26.4	67.6	14.4	39.2
car mechanic	48.9	56.1	6.1	40.6	8.4
baker	44.6	37.6	65.2	27.5	44.4
painter	44.0	31.5	10.9	32.4	15.1
retail sales staff	42.4	27.1	71.3	29.9	62.3
cleaner	39.0	15.4	15.5	39.5	43.1
road crew	39.0	30.4	5.0	36.1	20.7

Note. Occupational prestige scores were created by the 1995 SSM Research Committee. (JELS 2006)

Table 2 "Expectations" by Academic Performance (%)

	boys			girls		
	bottom	middle	top	bottom	middle	top
N	126	90	193	160	136	157
doctor	7.1	5.6	13.0	7.5	11.8	13.4
attorney	7.9	5.6	13.5	3.1	3.7	10.2
professor	4.8	3.3	14.5	2.5	5.1	9.6
scientist	9.5	11.1	26.4	7.5	13.2	10.2
entertainer	20.6	17.8	15.5	17.5	12.5	13.4
teacher	6.3	8.9	34.2	10.0	16.9	29.3
police officer	20.6	16.7	25.9	3.1	15.4	16.6
carpenter	41.3	36.7	34.2	7.5	9.6	12.1
nursery staff	17.5	27.8	26.4	51.3	49.3	51.0
office clerk	29.4	38.9	57.0	28.1	41.9	59.9
chef	28.6	32.2	27.5	29.4	27.9	31.8
hairdresser	15.9	8.9	19.2	42.5	39.0	38.9
car mechanic	47.6	43.3	43.5	6.9	8.1	10.8
baker	23.0	40.0	30.6	45.6	44.1	46.5
painter	34.1	35.6	36.8	11.9	14.0	20.4
retail sales staff	27.0	35.6	35.8	62.5	59.6	68.8
cleaner	29.4	43.3	52.8	30.6	45.6	56.7
road crew	35.7	41.1	42.0	14.4	19.9	29.3

(JELS 2006)

expectations.

Third, for jobs with high occupational prestige, the percentage of "expectations" is lower than the percentage of "interests," while for jobs with lower occupational prestige, the percentage of "expectations" is relatively higher. That is, while "interests" are formed by factors other than the score of occupational prestige, "expectations" reflect that score to some extent. It is worth noting that the score of "expectations" is not prominently high even for jobs with lower occupational prestige. We might say that students judge carefully whether or not they will actually be able to get certain jobs.

Table 2 shows the percentage of "expectations" by academic performance. I classify the top 40% as "top," the bottom 35% as "bottom," and the remainder as "middle." The higher academic performance is, the higher are the percentages of "expectations" in most occupations, except "entertainer." Essentially, students' hopes for employment are determined by their academic performance. We can assert that good academic performance can increase the number of occupational choices. In addition, academic performance has a significant effect on occupational aspirations for jobs that do not require high academic backgrounds. This tendency might be a uniquely Japanese feature.

On the other hand, although the level of academic performance is the same for boys and girls, "expectations" are different for each group. If we look at the "top," the number of students who said that they would be able to attain jobs with high occupational prestige is higher for boys than for girls. Only in so-called "pink-color" jobs, such as "nursery staff" and "retail sales staff" can we find higher "expectations" for girls than for boys. Overall, achievement selection results in differing outcomes in job consciousness between genders.

Girls aspire to low prestige jobs while boys aspire to high prestige jobs, even if they have similarly low academic performance rates. This tendency can be seen even in earlier literature; for instance, Kimura (1999) clarified that not only academic performance but also self respect influenced girls' aspirations for going on to university. For girls, the study of the defeat is urged through school life, and, in that sense, daily life is a "survival process" for them (Kimura, ibid, pp.142). Boys are not restricted by the achievement principle factors, while girls tend to adhere to them as seen here; the tendency for boys tend to aspire to high-prestige occupations might be evidence that boys have escaped the study of defeat. Thus, it is an important agenda of career education to find ways to improve girls' self respect in order to boost their educational and occupational achievement.

Conclusion

This study observed that junior high school students' occupational interests and expectations were differed greatly by gender, which appears to be a reflection of the gender-segregated labor market. This trend was clear even when girls' academic performance rates were high. It is particularly problematic that the percentage of boys who expect to achieve high prestige occupations is relatively higher than that of girls, since this trend means that the aspirations of girls with good academic

performance are somehow quelled. Thus, the same qualities of the "job world" should be taught to both boys and girls through career education, and girls should be supported in their efforts to "survive." It is important for girls to be supported when converting educational attainment into occupational aspirations.

In addition, junior high school students' occupational interests do not lie with high prestige occupations, but with jobs at the medium level. Students seem to think that prestige and achievement expectations are in inverse proportion to each other, possibly believing that jobs which require long-term education and training are difficult to achieve. This seems to show that students' occupational aspirations have been quelled in their schools. The reinvigoration of occupational aspirations should become a high-priority task for the field of career education.

In contemporary society, men have a particular image about traditional career formation: they must get a stable job in order to live and feed their families. It is important for the future of society to help people develop their own career formation voluntarily, regardless of gender and family situations; therefore, we must keep in mind that people's interests and concerns, which lead to individual "trajectories," and their resulting choices will be determined in advance by external systems, such as gender role norms.

Notes

1. This understanding is found in the policy of career education. "'Career' is deeply connected with way of life, sense of worth, and view of work and career, which are supposed to lead to an idea about what " working" is. Through the choice of definitive occupations and workplaces and through experiences had in the process of making these choices, people should be able to gradually create their 'careers' (Ministry of Education, 2004, pp. 7-8)."
2. The view of career and work in this study means "t he knowledge and understanding of a career and work, the individual recognition of the meaning and role of work in one's life, and the sense of worth in the view of, thoughts about, and attitude toward a career and work. In this sense, we develop a view of life through work in a career. This view of career and work is a criterion of people's life choices and a basis for the adjustment of their future lives" (Guidance and Counseling Research Center, National Institute for Education Policy Research of Japan, 2002, p. 21)

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Acknowledgement

This is a part of the results of the Japan Education Longitudinal Study (JELS).

This paper is a revised version of a paper prepared for presentation at the Conference of the Asia Pacific Educational Research Association in Singapore, November 2008.

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