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Emerging inequality in effort: A longitudinal investigation of parental involvement and early elementary school-aged children's learning time in Japan



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ABSTRACT

While studies on effort (e.g., Carbonaro, 2005; Kariya, 2000, 2013) have revealed relationships among students' effort (e.g., self-reported learning time), socioeconomic status, and school-related factors (e.g., tracking) through secondary education data, whether and how the effort gap emerges and widens in the early years of compulsory education have not been researched. This study investigates the beginning of inequality in effort by using four waves (from first- to fourth-grade students) of the Longitudinal Survey of Babies in the 21st Century, collected in Japan. The results indicate that college-educated parents tend to employ parenting practices that directly and indirectly shape children's learning time; inequality in effort exists, and it becomes exacerbated partly because of parenting differences in a society with a relatively equal elementary education system.

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1. Introduction

In a meritocratic society, individuals' merit is regarded as a combination of their ability and effort (Young, 1958). According to studies on effort (e.g., Carbonaro, 2005; Kariya, 2000, 2013), while a meritocracy presumes that particular conditions such as parents' social class do not affect "merit" (i.e., ability and effort), how much effort one applies is, in fact, influenced by individual and school-related factors such as family socioeconomic status (SES) and ability grouping or tracking. It is critically important to investigate the differences in effort especially in a society such as Japan where, as Kariya (2000, 2013) notes, hard work is emphasized and embraced more than ability as a determinant of educational attainment. More specifically, the Japanese-style meritocracy is based on "the premise that ability is distributed equally among classes and effort (is) entirely a matter of individual freewill" (Kariya, 2013, p. 127). Kariya (2000, 2013) seeks to demonstrate that this belief is a mere ideological construct by empirically showing social-class differentials in effort among high school students; he contends that the disparity in educational attainment is not solely a consequence of differences in ability, but of hidden influences of social class through disparity in effort. Therefore, failing to consider the influence of social class on disparity in effort obscures the relationship between social class and educational attainment (Kariya, 2000, 2013).¹

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¹ A relationship between individuals' social background and their educational attainment in Japanese society has been repeatedly documented (e.g., LeTendre, 1996).

Given that the inequality in effort conceals that of educational attainment (Kariya, 2000, 2013), previous studies in Japan have attempted to disentangle relationships between students' SES, students' effort, and school-related factors by using lower and upper secondary education data. However, whether and how the effort gap emerges in the early years of compulsory education have not been researched. Therefore, this study attempts to deepen our understanding of social class inequality in effort by shedding light on the beginning stage of compulsory education, using four waves (from first- to fourth-grade students) of the Longitudinal Survey of Babies in the 21st Century, which was conducted by the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare between 2001 and 2011. This study first identifies whether parents' level of education relates to their parenting practices that directly and indirectly shape children's learning time outside school. Second, it investigates whether parenting practices influence children's learning time, so as to discover whether and how the inequality in effort emerges and increases in the early years of compulsory education.

The Japanese context is distinctive in that it helps add new insight to processes of social reproduction because social-class differences in parenting practices are considered a source of inequality in educational attainment (e.g., Honda, 2008). Unlike the US, Japanese compulsory education is progressively funded across 47 prefectures; economically backward prefectures spend more per student based on financial support from the central government (Kariya, 2009). Presumably because of this progressive investment in public education, between-school differences are small in elementary education in terms of financing level and teacher qualification (e.g., Cummings, 1980); this means that students who attend public schools (about 99% of the student population) receive relatively similar learning experiences within the formal education system.² Thus, the achievement gap along socioeconomic lines likely emerges outside the formal school system, rather than inside classrooms, and is based on differences in parenting practices including whether to use outside-school educational services. This examination with Japanese data is intended to be a rigorous test case to reveal how parental advantages are transmitted to their children through outside-school education in a seemingly egalitarian education system.

2. Studies on learning time in Japan

Arguably, Kariya's study (2000, 2013) is the most influential in the study of learning time in Japan. He argues that even though individuals' self-learning time can be considered as a sociological index to represent their effort, no previous studies investigated the association between students' family backgrounds and their levels of effort in learning. Kariya's study on high school students' learning hours outside formal schooling indicates considerable differences in the length of self-study hours, depending on students' SES and high school ranking (tracking position). Additionally, students' SES came to play a greater role in shaping their learning hours outside school between 1979 and 1997 (Kariya, 2000, 2013; Kariya and Rosenbaum, 2003). Apart from Kariya's research, a few empirical studies on students' effort and study habits have been conducted in Japan; the effect of SES on effort was found among sixth graders (Kaneko, 2004; Ottawa, 2008), junior-high school students (Koyama, 2011; Origuchi, 2008), high school freshmen (Matsuoka, 2013), and high school seniors (Aramaki, 2002).

Importantly, the relationship between children's learning time and their academic performance has also been assessed. A recent study by Shinogaya and Akabayashi (2012) using structural equation modeling indicates that children's family SES and educational investment in activities outside school, including shadow education services, are associated with differences in learning time, which then shape their academic performance. In other words, children's learning time mediates a relationship between SES and academic performance in elementary education (fourth to sixth grade). The association between learning time and achievement in sixth grade (the final grade in elementary education) has also been repeatedly documented by annual nationwide surveys conducted by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) on academic ability from 2007 to 2014.³ This tendency—namely, that the longer sixth graders apply effort (i.e., studying longer outside schools), the better they perform academically—remains valid when other factors including family SES and parental educational expectations for their children are controlled, according to a research report by Ochanomizu University (2014),⁴ which combined data from the nationwide survey for the academic year 2013 with an additional survey of children's guardians, it was noted that sixth graders' learning time independently influences their academic performance.

In addition to these studies using domestic data, the association between learning time and achievement in Japan has been consistently demonstrated on large-scale international surveys, specifically Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). In fact, in Japan, students who reportedly spent the longest time studying mathematics or worked on math homework outside school have the highest mean achievement scores in fourth grade (Mullis et al., 1997) and eighth grade (Beaton et al., 1996), as assessed by TIMSS, and in tenth grade, as determined by PISA (OECD, 2011). This pattern holds even when controlling for other individual and school characteristics such as students' SES and school factors, according to studies (OECD, 2011; Matsuoka, 2013) using PISA 2006. Crucially, this consistent pattern across the grades appears to be specific to Japan and not applicable to most countries such

² To verify this point, intraclass correlation (ICC) was estimated using the fourth-grade dataset of Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) administered in 2011. The results showed that approximately only 5% variation in math achievement exists between elementary schools in Japan, while it is about 30% in the US, implying greater gaps among US schools.

³ Through correlation analyses and comparison of means (crosstabs), reports by the National Institute for Educational Policy Research (NIER) indicate a consistent correlation between children's learning time outside school and their academic performance in the national language and arithmetic tests.

⁴ In this report, the SES variable, used in regression analyses, was created based on parents' education and household income from the survey of guardians.

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