



**Intense Years: How Japanese Adolescents Balance School, Family, and Friends.**

Fukuzawa, Rebecca Erwin, and Gerald K. Letendre. New York: Routledge, 2001. 137 pp.

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In *Intense Years*, Fukuzawa and Letendre provide a detailed ethnographic account of late-20th-century Japanese middle schools. The authors also examine the relationship among the conflicting demands placed on children, families, and schools and the broader contradictions within Japanese society, especially those surrounding social class and family composition. The English literature on Japanese schools has focused less on middle schools than on other levels of education, but the authors maintain that an understanding of middle schools illuminates wider tensions in contemporary Japan in a particularly salient manner. The crux of their argument is that, on the one hand, the education system is entrusted with raising children to be moral individuals who can form lasting and meaningful relationships, work well in groups, and appreciate natural and artistic beauty. On the other hand, schools and the examination system are a major means of sorting individuals. Sorting places individuals in social and economic hierarchies and legitimates the unequal distribution of social rewards, rationalizing this inequality as the natural outcome of a society that is a meritocracy. While this type of sorting happens in many societies, it currently occurs with particular intensity among very young Japanese teenagers.

In middle school, children aged 13 to 15 leave the relatively nurturing, egalitarian atmosphere cultivated in Japanese primary schools and face higher expectations from their parents, teachers, and themselves to compete on standardized tests that determine who gains admission to prestigious high schools. The authors believe that middle school students balance the heavy pressure to perform well academically by cultivating intense social relationships fostered in nonacademic, student-centered classes such as art, music, home economics, and physical education. These classes comprise fully a third of the middle school curriculum. An even more important counter to academic demands is quasi-compulsory club activity, where some students spend more than 20 hours a week. Middle school children have little time for family life, but this is generally not viewed as a problem, since schools are entrusted with the major responsibility for students' social, moral, and academic development. However, problems such as bullying, school violence, truancy, and school dropouts are a major source of concern in Japan. Fukuzawa and Letendre point out that in comparison with other developed countries, the instance of these problems in Japan is relatively low. The authors believe that the widespread focus on these problems in Japan reflects the high expectations placed on the school system, as well as the anxiety people feel about the future in the face of Japan's flat economic performance.



The authors have a thorough knowledge of rural and urban Japanese middle schools based on many years of structured research and participant observation. (I would have found it useful if they had given more details about the nature of the research projects to which they frequently refer.) They provide a succinct overview of recent Japanese history and explain how the broad powers of the Ministry of Education create a high degree of uniformity within the Japanese education system. However, they are firmly opposed to the notion that "the Japanese are all alike." In contrast with many authors who write about Japan by either idealizing or vilifying it, *Intense Years* neither suggests that the Japanese school system should be a model for schools in the rest of the world, nor do the authors point out the weaknesses of the Japanese school system in order to convey the underlying message that American (or other) schools and, thus, American (or other) societies, are superior to Japanese schools and society. They discuss the internal logic of—as well as inconsistencies in—the world of Japanese middle schools, using well-chosen quotes that allow the reader to get a sense of the people who are the topic of this project. They portray the points of view of students, parents, and middle school faculty, and describe the ubiquitous private schools, which provide after-school tutoring (and childcare) for those on the academic fast track, and for others who do not want to fall behind.

The book uses five case studies to depict the range of solutions created by students, families, and schools to cope with the heavy academic pressure placed on children at a much earlier age than was the case even 20 years ago. The case studies are presented in small sections throughout the book, and I frequently had to flip back to where the students were introduced in order to keep them straight. The glossary of terms will be helpful to readers unfamiliar with Japanese, but I found the method of Romanizing Japanese words, enclosing the long vowels in "<>" brackets, to be quite distracting. There is a useful bibliography of mostly English language sources; the bibliography seems to be free from the liberal sprinkling of typographic errors in the book. The minor drawbacks of this volume do not detract from its usefulness for those doing research on comparative education and adolescent development, and for students of Japanese culture and society. *Intense Years* would make a fine supplementary text for classes on contemporary Japan, for it provides a wealth of theoretically situated information, and is also a great read. A final strength of the book is that the authors care deeply for middle school students.

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