

Teacher Suicides and the Future of Japanese Education

Hiratate Hideaki

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by *Hiratate Hideaki*

[The quality and elan of primary and secondary education have long been regarded as among the achievements of postwar Japan. Journalist Hiratate Hideaki uses the window of increasing teacher suicides to probe recent changes in education that have placed many of Japan's finest teachers on a collision course with their principles, supervisors, and ultimately the Japanese state. The author shows how a combination of the new nationalism, neo-liberal criteria for teacher assessment, and increased demands on teachers have brought about a situation in which large numbers of teachers are succumbing to mental illness, committing suicide, or taking early retirement. These articles appeared in the July 4 and August 29, 2003 issues of *Shukan Kinyobi*.]

Part 1: Why Are Teacher Suicides Increasing?

"Yumiko, I'm sorry. I'm a bit tired from work at school."

It was on January 24, 1983 that Kikuchi Akinori, then 29, a teacher at Heita Elementary School in Kamaishi, Iwate Prefecture, left his wife this note and took his own life.

This was the day he was to deliver the final draft of the teaching plan for an open session of a class in moral education that was scheduled for February 4. But when Akinori left his home that morning he did not head for school, but instead went missing. Two weeks after his disappearance, on February 6, he was found hanging by the neck in a mountain forest in a neighboring town.

In 1987, his wife Yumiko, now 52, filed an application with the prefectural branch of the public employee accident compensation fund to have his death recognized as a work-related accident. She maintained that the cause of the suicide was Akinori's forced participation in the public moral education class, which violated his educational philosophy, and that he suffered from "reactive depression" due to an excessive workload.

However, the following year the death was ruled

nonwork-related, and requests for the branch office of the fund to reexamine the case were rejected. Then in 1992, Yumiko filed suit in the Morioka District Court to overturn the nonwork-related determination. This administrative case represented the first time that the courts would rule on whether or not a teacher's suicide from overwork constituted a work-related accident.

Distress over the Open Moral Education Class

Akinori was assigned to Heita Elementary School in April 1982. It was his seventh year of teaching and the first time he had been given a first grade class to teach.

Heita Elementary School had been designated a trial school for moral education by the city board of education, and open sessions of the moral education class had been held during the 1980 and 1981 school years. The principal at the time placed a great deal of importance on moral education and decided on his own initiative to hold open sessions again during the 1982 school year. The session scheduled for February 4, 1983 had been assigned to Akinori.

What distressed Akinori was the approach used in the moral education class. This had been dubbed the "Heita method" and involved dividing the class into groups of "good," "bad," and "normal" children, and then conducting the class with children from each of the groups.

Akinori had serious doubts about this discriminatory approach. However, the evaluation of the school depended on the success of the public sessions. Under this psychological pressure, Akinori had begun to suffer headaches and low-grade fevers in the first term of the year.

During the second term, in addition to a daily workload that exceeded eight hours without a break, there were preparations for the school excursion and class performances. On top of this, there were 26 meetings of an in-school study group to prepare for the open sessions, and Akinori led study classes in Japanese and moral education in November. Beginning around this time, he was often up past one in the morning preparing teaching materials, and he was unable to get sufficient sleep. His appetite diminished and his weight fell from 57 kilos (125 pounds) to 52 (114). Yumiko encouraged him to see a doctor but he refused, saying that everything "would have to wait until after the moral education class." He began to show his agony over the class, saying, "Dividing [children] into superior, average, and inferior is something I can't do." When asked about the opening ceremony for the beginning of the third term [in January], he responded with a dull "What?"

Two days before he disappeared, on Saturday, January 22, Akinori had been ordered by the principal to revise his teaching plan. Afterwards he was observed by a colleague, standing alone

on a landing of the school stairs. Then on Monday the 24th, carrying the teaching plan he had polished the day before, he disappeared.

Despite the fact that Akinori was missing, the open session took place as planned on February 4, with another teacher in the lead. It is easy to imagine, given the coldness of the school's response, that their sole purpose was to successfully carry off the public class.

In 2001, the district court determined that Akinori's death was work-related on the grounds that he "had been assigned duties against his wishes" and that "he suffered depression and committed suicide as a result of an excessive workload." It was a victory for Yumiko, and an epoch-making decision that recognized the qualitative side of teaching as a profession.

However, in December of 2002, the Sendai High Court overturned the lower court decision. "Teaching plans for moral education classes had been developed even by inexperienced teachers, and this burden was not just placed on Akinori," the court reasoned, applying the "collegial standard." One wonders if the heavy responsibility of a teacher in forming children's character or a teacher's internal anguish is something that can be measured by a collegial standard.

Last year, nineteen years after Akinori's death, a

male junior high-school teacher in his 30s hanged himself in the same city of Kamaishi. He had been diagnosed with anxiety depression. Psychological disorders among teachers have gotten progressively more serious.

Victims of Managed Education

According to statistics released by the Ministry of Education, Science, Sports, and Culture, the number of teachers on temporary leave for psychological disorders has more than doubled in the last decade--from 1,017 in 1990 to 2,503 in 2001, which represents an increase from 27 percent to 48 percent of all medical leaves.

Meanwhile, since the total number of employed teachers decreased by more than 70,000 over the same decade, the percentage of teachers taking medical leave for psychological reasons has increased even more dramatically (from 0.10 percent to 0.27 percent of the total teacher workforce).

Ota Hiroyuki (a pseudonym for a teacher in his 50s) developed depression soon after being appointed senior teacher [an administrative position] at a junior high school. During his years as a teacher, he had never been depressed, even when his ribs were broken as a result of student violence. Dealing directly with children had always buoyed his spirit.

Ota was a dedicated teacher and, with the encouragement of his principal, he decided to pursue an administrative position. However, in his training prior to his appointment as senior teacher, he was drilled in the proper administrative frame of mind, which included directing teachers to display the national flag and require the singing of the national anthem, and putting an end to teachers' at-home training [a practice whereby secondary school teachers are allowed stay-at-home days to conduct individual research or study]. Ota sensed a wide gap between these directives and his own philosophy of education. As an individual educator, these demands from the administration were the very things he had always had a hard time accepting.

Having assumed the position of senior teacher, Ota no longer had direct contact with students. The senior teacher's job was to take care of all the complicated tasks that were not covered by other job assignments in the administration. He found himself swamped with work, even on weekends, negotiating with the PTA and the district and taking care of office work that had little to do with education. He rarely got a day off.

The anguish he felt increased when, with the introduction of a merit-rating system, he was required to rank the teachers on the school's staff. He was increasingly unable to sleep and began taking tranquilizers.

According to Ota, "I didn't know how I could divide the teachers [according to their performance]. I hadn't actually seen the teachers at work, so it would be just an impressionistic evaluation. It was painful to think that [because of my evaluation] a good teacher could be destroyed."

About two years after assuming his post, Ota became psychologically stressed and began to suspect that he suffered from depression. He lost interest in things, and his smile disappeared. He had no difficulty with mechanical paperwork, but he was entirely unable to perform tasks like writing. He became unable to think. Finally everything he saw began to appear sepia-colored.

He was diagnosed with depression and hospitalized, which only increased his suffering. He began to think, "[It's my fault] that the burden on the principal has increased. It's my responsibility if I collapse." He fell into a state of distraction with anxiety and impatience about returning to work. It took an entire year before he recovered. Today, Ota has been allowed to step down from his administrative position and to return to the classroom as a teacher.

"[Having returned to the classroom,] I feel the pleasure of teaching. Without freedom and responsibility, you can't have good education. But nowadays, everything is supervised . . ." The words of Ota, a man who has struggled with

managed education.

With managed education, which robs teachers of their discretion, free education is not remotely possible. This kind of workplace environment is a breeding ground for depression.

Teachers Face Serious Health Problems

"It is a big mistake to label teachers who are on leave [for psychological disorders] as unqualified. Teachers have a strong orientation toward model behavior; they think, 'If I try hard, I'll manage.' [Nearly all of the teachers who come for treatment] think only of the children. They are trusted by the students and their parents. Lazy teachers don't get sick."

These are the words of Nyu Seiji, a doctor at Oita Kyowa Hospital who is knowledgeable about psychological disorders among teachers. According to Dr. Nyu, most of these dedicated teachers suffer from chronic fatigue. That they try to accomplish the physically impossible is not unrelated to an educational system that encourages their exertion. This is the context that results in the most serious and sensible teachers developing psychological problems.

For example, it is not at all unusual for a doctor to prescribe complete rest and tell a teacher, "I'll write you a medical report," only to be told, "I can't rest until I've finished my report cards." In

the end, the teacher collapses and has to be hospitalized. These teachers have fallen into a desensitized state, where they are unable to recognize their own exhaustion.

Consequently, treatment also takes longer for teachers. Complete recovery in six months is considered fast, and some take as long as two years. Patients hospitalized with severe cases will, under medication, sleep fifteen hours a day for a month. This is an indication of how much their fatigue has accumulated. Dr. Nyu works at getting the patients to recognize the limits of their physical strength and to develop "the courage to rest when they're in pain."

Behind the spread of chronic fatigue among teachers is the problem of increased workloads. The introduction of the five-day school week last year has meant that work that was accomplished in six days must now be taken care of in five, resulting in the congestion of the class schedule. During the hours children are at school, there are effectively no breaks or rest periods. Teachers are on their feet all day, in some cases unable even to get a drink of water between classes. Paper work, meetings, and planning sessions are concentrated in the hours after school, so the job doesn't end during work hours. As a consequence, the preparation of handouts and grading of papers have to be done at home, and the long hours of work become an everyday matter. Saturday and Sunday are filled with preparing teaching plans

and materials for the following week.

According to a survey conducted in October 2002 by the Japan Teachers Union (Nikkyoso), teachers averaged ten hours a week of service outside of regular work hours (not including compensated extra duty for such things as school events), and an additional nine hours of catch-up work at home. Further, 74.4 percent of teachers responded that they were unable to rest during their break time.

Teachers are also unable to obtain sufficient sleep. In an All Japan Teachers and Staff Union (Zenkyo) survey, teachers average six hours, eleven minutes of sleep a night, with about 40 percent reporting less than six hours. In addition, more than 80 percent reported feeling "anxiety, distress, or stress" about their work.

As a result of lack of sleep, there are many accidents such as slipping on the stairs at school and breaking bones. And the reality is that, when teachers' fatigue accumulates they are unable to take time off because of the shortage of substitute teachers. Given this state of affairs, increasing numbers of teachers now retire before retirement age because they reach their physical and psychological limits. The Zenkyo survey reported that 53 percent of teachers think about quitting sometimes or often; the most commonly cited reasons were "I am too busy with work" and "I can't take it physically."

One elementary school teacher (a man in his 50s) reported, "There have been teachers who collapsed in the classroom or in the toilet at school. Last year, among only people I know, four teachers died. It strikes very close to home." In the Zenkyo survey, some 58 percent of teachers reported feeling anxiety about death from overwork.

A work environment that robs teachers of healthy body and spirit is abnormal. The fact that teachers are worked as if they were pack horses gives us a glimpse of the intentions of a country that wants to have its own way with education.

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Last December, Kikuchi Yumiko appealed, moving the stage for the suit over Akinori's accident compensation to the Supreme Court. "I don't want anyone else to suffer what we have gone through as a family," comments Yumiko, who is herself an active-duty teacher.

The history of the recognition of workers' accidents is, at the same time, the history of many victims. In the effort to sound a warning over the severe working environment that teachers are placed in, Akinori's death must not be in vain.

What is Happening to Education in Hiroshima?

Keitoku Kazuhiro, 56, the principal of Takasugi Elementary School in the city of Onomichi,

Hiroshima Prefecture, took his own life on March 9 of this year. It was a suicide caused by overwork.

In March 2002 Keitoku had been brought in from the private sector to work as a principal, as part of an experimental initiative to introduce new leadership in the schools. However, he was subjected to such an arduous workload that he was diagnosed with depression just a month and a half after he assumed his post. According to a survey by the Hiroshima Teachers Union, administrators work more than 150 hours of overtime in most months. At a time when two senior teachers had collapsed from overwork in succession, Keitoku was crushed under a total of 370 reports required by the city board of education. Just before his suicide, Keitoku was working an average of over seven hours of overtime a day.

Keitoku's tragedy was widely reported in the media and is fresh in memory. However, the death from overwork of a junior high school teacher in the same city of Onomichi six months earlier is not well known. Keitoku was not the only one swamped by work under the banner of educational reform.

Collapsing in Front of the Students

Nishikawa Osamu, then 54 and a teacher at Kurihara Junior High School in Onomichi, died

in September 2002 of an acute brain hemorrhage. Fond of saying, "Unless you can loosen up, there can't be good teaching," he was well-trusted by those around him. At the same time, he often complained, "You can't raise children on supervision alone. We've lost the flexibility to arrange things so we can nurture." Discouraged about the possibility of teaching according to his ideals, he had decided he would take early retirement in March 2003.

Nishikawa was a home-room teacher for second-year students and taught five Japanese classes. On the side, he also counseled students, supervised the health service, and managed planning for the annual class trip.

A new national course of study was issued in 2002, at the same time that the school week was shortened to five days, and the teaching schedule was compressed. At the same time, Onomichi city school teachers were required to prepare syllabuses and weekly lesson plans, and the preparation of massive numbers of surveys and reports was added to the teachers' heavy burden.

On top of all of this, last year marked the full implementation of a program called Onomichi Education Plan 21. This Onomichi take on educational reform aimed to achieve the top level in compulsory education. Its components, introduced in quick succession, included the "one school, one inquiry" program to build schools

with particular characters; a general studies program of making study trips to workplaces; and compulsory open-session moral education classes, along with national academic standards testing to ensure solid achievement. The program encouraged competition among the schools and overwhelmed the schools with work.

It appears that Nishikawa entered the new school year under stress, concerned that the new course of study did not allot enough time for the study of Japanese, while new texts arrived just before school began, allowing him little time to prepare. In addition, there were daily meetings at the start of the school year to wrestle with the implementation of the workplace study trip program.

During the first term, Nishikawa was pressed with preparations both for the school athletic day and for the class trip. Training for the athletic meet took place during an intense heat wave, and around that time he began to complain of headaches and pain in the neck. He brought increasing loads of work home at night, and several days before he collapsed, he had a stack of 200 student essays to read and critique, in addition to planning for the class trip. He took to saying, "I'm tired. Weary." When his family encouraged him to take some time off, he refused, "I can't until after the meeting on the class trip." On his way to class the day before he died, Nishikawa tripped on the stairs. A

colleague who saw him picking up chalk soon afterward remembers that his movement was sluggish.

The next day, September 26, the meeting to explain the class trip to the students and their guardians took place in the school gym. Just a few minutes after the meeting began, Nishikawa collapsed suddenly. He was taken to the hospital, but he was already in a coma.

Nishikawa had collapsed in front of a large number of students. It was undoubtedly a great shock to many people. But, according to a colleague, "Within a week, everything returned to normal at the school, as if nothing had happened." This too is an indication of how, pressed to the wall by their work, his colleagues were unable to indulge their emotions.

There Is Not Even Inner Freedom

"I should have quit two years ago. I can't teach the way I want to. Old bones, make way!" Nishikawa spoke this way to people around him. In these words, we can see clearly the state of education in Hiroshima.

The number of young retirees among teachers and administrators in Hiroshima has been steadily increasing. Early retirees, according to prefectural board of education statistics, averaged about 93 per year in the late 1990s, but

soared to 162 in 2002. This is because, as Nishikawa said, teachers "can't teach the way they want to." For example, given the required submission of syllabi and lesson plans, teachers can't deviate from the bounds of the national course of study. Further, like corporate competition over business results, everything has been reduced to numerical measures. Schools have become like factories, and education based on the teacher's discretion has become impossible.

The increased supervision of education in Hiroshima Prefecture was begun in response to a reform directive issued by the Ministry of Education in 1998. The immediate cause was the practice of some of the schools in the city of Fukuyama of listing the moral education course as "Human Rights" and kokugo, the "national language," which is how Japanese language and literature classes are referred to in elementary and secondary schools, as "Japanese" in the class schedule. This was a deviation from the national course of study, and the prefectural board of education was directed to report for the next three years on the status of rectification efforts. The reports were required to cover thirteen topics in both educational content and school administration. The items included not only the name and content of moral education classes, but such matters as whether the national flag was displayed at school ceremonies, whether the national anthem was taught and sung, the

supervision of teachers' work and their hours, and the management of teachers meetings.

Hiroshima has a long history of conducting peace education, as the site of the atomic bombing, and dowa education, aimed at eliminating discrimination against Burakumin. These programs were developed and approved independently by the educational administration, working in association with a variety of organizations. However, after the reform directive, the prefectural board of education declared that "a variety of compromises were made necessary in the course of negotiations with teachers' organizations, dowa education research associations, and various activist groups, and the neutrality of education was compromised." This represented a 180 degree reversal of the policy. Dowa education was now considered deviant.

To begin with, the authority of the principal as a supervisor was reinforced. Teachers' meetings became an extension of the principal, with a strengthened chain of authority to transmit his directives. There were principals who declared, "Those who don't follow my direction are no longer needed at this school," and democratic operation of the schools became increasingly difficult. According to one teacher, a principal baldly said, "Why don't you just quit?" when he handed out the monthly pay slip. Relations among teachers were strained, as they were

made to compete to prove their loyalty to the administrators.

The rectification directive was an authoritarian document that implied that those who did not conform would be punished, and that supervision and control were indications of loyalty to the Ministry of Education. The absolute policy regarding the national flag and anthem at graduation and entrance ceremonies is an example. The report form sent to all school principals by the prefectural board of education required detailed information in response to such questions as, "Was the flag displayed at the front of the stage?" and "Did the singing of the anthem echo across the ceremony hall?" In the "Principal's Handbook" there was even a manual, in question and answer format, for how to deal with teachers who refused to stand for the national anthem. In this manner, 100 percent of public high schools in Hiroshima Prefecture were brought into compliance.

There are reports of a principal who called the parents of a child who remained seated during the singing of "Kimigayo." There were those who took photographs of teachers as they were singing to record how widely they opened their mouths. Someone connected to a PTA came into a classroom one day suddenly and demanded, "You're the teacher who sat during the singing of 'Kimigayo,' and you have the nerve to think you can teach!"--what amounted to a regional

surveillance of teachers' speech and conduct. And, in February 1999, Ishikawa Toshihiro, the principal of Sera High School, committed suicide as a result of contention over the national flag/anthem issue.

Managed education has taken hold in Hiroshima Prefecture to such an extent that people have been robbed of their internal freedom, but is this problem peculiar to Hiroshima?

Educational Reform Sans Children

"[What happens in Hiroshima] has become a test case for educational reform in all of Japan. If the government was to move ahead with educational reform, peace education was an obstacle and it was necessary to crush down education."

These are the words of Ishioka Osamu, secretary-general of the Hiroshima Teachers Union. Many teachers describe Hiroshima as having been made the laboratory or, alternatively, the breach point for educational reform.

Presently, the government is preparing to embark on educational reform of radical proportions, perhaps encompassing revision of the Fundamental Law of Education. One can sense the government's enthusiasm for reform as a great national movement in its official plan, "Educational Reform for the 21st Century" [issued in January 2002]. Its fundamental

perspective is that "there is a spreading tendency to place too much emphasis on the individual while neglecting the 'public'. . . . The standardization of education due to excessive egalitarianism . . . has tended to push aside education geared to fit the individuality or capabilities of children." It seeks to introduce principles of selection and competition into school education. The Onomichi Education Plan 21, with its school evaluation system, can be seen as the vanguard of nationwide educational reform.

What, then, is the situation in the schools themselves? According to Imatani Kenji, secretary-general of the other teachers association, the All Hiroshima Teachers and Staff Union, "The distinguishing feature of the rectification directive and [Hiroshima's] educational reform, is that it is all about the form education ought to take, but children are absent from the discussion. We should be talking about what should be done for the children of Hiroshima."

Teachers are being driven into competition between schools and into a race for meeting numerical goals, and they are increasingly unable to engage their students. And in order to meet their numerical goals, they are increasingly forced to interact with children in mechanical and managerial ways.

At the same time, teachers are swamped with the burgeoning surveys and reports sent down from the prefecture and city. The question of whether teachers can finish their work or not has become one of how quickly they can move children from task to task and perform their many clerical tasks. In the words of the Hiroshima Teachers Union's Ishioka, "With the mountain of paperwork faced by teachers in the classroom, they have no sense that they are actually teaching. It's work performed to the neglect of children."

This has given rise to a situation where, when children come to ask a teacher to clarify something, the response is, "Ask that during the class," or "I'm too busy to look at that."

This situation, where an extreme workload can eat away at teachers' psychological health, is reflected in the number of Hiroshima teachers taking leaves for psychological reasons, which has increased steadily in the years since the rectification directive was issued in 1998: where psychological leaves stood at 69 during the 1997 school year (36 percent of all medical leaves), by 2001 they had increased to 116 (45 percent of the total). Last year, in one elementary school in the city of Fukuyama, six of fifteen teachers took leave for treatment of psychological disorders. One class went through four primary teachers in half a year.

Mr. A, a guidance counselor at a prefectural high school, committed suicide in April of 2001. "Nipping [students] in the bud is not education. What have I been doing [as a teacher] all these years? You're too cold. I quit," Mr. A declared at a meeting to determine whether or not students would pass into the next grade. Several days later he killed himself. During the meeting there had been a confrontation among a number of teachers over failing a particular student. Mr. A's protest was against the application of a hard and fast deadline, when just a day of remedial work would have allowed the student to pass. At this same high school, nine months after Mr. A's death, another teacher who had been on long-term medical leave committed suicide.

According to a Hiroshima Teachers Union survey, twelve educators in the prefecture

committed suicide between 1999 and the present. Of these, five were principals, one was a senior teacher, and the remaining six were classroom teachers.

Intensified supervision and control under the rectification directive has led to numerous suicides and medical leaves. And Hiroshima's educational reform is quickly becoming a test case for "selective, competitive" educational model that the government is trying to implement nationally. It is a frantically driven form of education under the banner of "liberalization." Hiroshima's educational reform--in the absence of children--is the shape of things to come in the near future for Japanese education.

Translation for Japan Focus by John Junkerman.