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School–work systems in postindustrial societies: Evidence from Japan

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Abstract

The Japanese system of school–work has been widely admired for the strong communication and recruitment relationships that exist between high schools and employers. We develop a framework for understanding the macro-level conditions that fostered the effectiveness of the system up until the early 1990s. These conditions included a stratified secondary educational system, a large supply of high-quality high school graduates, and high demand for young workers to fill entry-level positions in the internal labor markets of large firms. We use original data from a sample of urban high schools to analyze how Japanese employers' recruitment patterns changed in the 1990s and beyond. The results of that analysis and a counterfactual analysis suggest that recent changes, especially in Japanese employment institutions, have significantly weakened high school–employer relationships. We suggest implications of the Japanese case for school–work processes in other postindustrial societies.
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1. Introduction

The youth labor market is an important area of policy concern in postindustrial societies. Many countries have witnessed deterioration in youths' employment prospects over the past two decades, as seen in heightened rates of unemployment and idleness as well as depressed wages relative to prime-age workers. These outcomes contrast with what some social scientists had predicted for the early 21st century: that increased educational attainment, growth in economic sectors that tend to be youth-intensive, and increased labor demand due to population aging would privilege young people in the labor market (Blanchflower & Freeman, 2000; Freeman & Katz, 1995; Honda, 2003; Ryan, 2001).

The widening of labor market outcomes between highly educated and less-educated young people has been of particular concern. This has led social scientists and policymakers to be very interested in the positive contributions that institutional arrangements can make to smoothing the transition from school to work for high school graduates (Breen, 2005; Freeman & Katz, 1995; Rosenbaum & Kariya, 1989; Rosenbaum, 2001; Ryan, 2001). In particular, the German and Japanese school–work systems have frequently been singled out

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as models of efficiency. Many observers in the 1980s and early 1990s linked the strong economic performance of those two economies and the lack of severe problems in their youth labor markets to the nature of their national educational and employment institutions (Bailey, 2001; Blanchflower & Freeman, 2000; Mitani, 1999; Mortimer & Kruger, 2000; OECD, 1999; Rosenbaum & Kariya, 1989). Indeed, many social scientists have discussed high school–work policies in terms of the key features of the German and Japanese systems: apprenticeship (the "German system"), and long-term recruitment relationships between high schools and employers (the "Japanese system").

However, in recent years the Japanese school–work system appears to have unraveled to a considerable extent, and the German system has also been under duress (Honda, 2003; Müller, Steinmann, & Ell, 1998). What does the faltering nature of these heretofore effective institutional arrangements tell us about the macro-level conditions that supported them? While the German and Japanese systems have attracted less attention in their faltering phase than they did in their heyday, this paper argues for a closer look at "what went wrong." We suggest that when institutional performance declines, social scientists have a prime opportunity to analyze the underlying conditions that nurtured institutional effectiveness to begin with.

Our focus in this paper is the Japanese system of high school to work. Japan is an important case for two reasons. First, figuring out how and why its high school–work institutions have changed is significant from a policy point of view. The main reason American social scientists have paid attention to the Japanese model is because they have been interested to find features of it that might be "exportable" to the U.S. The strong points of Japanese school–work institutions have garnered attention in broad comparative studies as well as in more focused comparisons with the U.S. (Blanchflower & Freeman, 2000; Rosenbaum & Kariya, 1989; Rosenbaum, 2001; Ryan, 2001), with many observers in the 1980s and into the 1990s asserting that the U.S. would benefit from the adoption of some of these features. Second, Japan is a strategic research site from an empirical point of view: because its high school–work system is undergirded by a set of nationwide policies, we are able to focus in on a local context and analyze in-depth the operation and unraveling of the system. This is an empirical advantage because the data requirements for analyzing institutional change are very demanding, and we believe the workings of a school–work system can best be seen by looking in depth at a local labor market.

We analyze how Japan's nationally uniform, well-articulated system of moving students from upper secondary school into work has performed under significant recent change in three macro-level conditions:

(1) The transition from a manufacturing-based to a service-based economy.
(2) The rapid increase in the proportion of high school graduates who proceed to higher education.
(3) Employers' restructuring of job openings away from entry-level positions in firm-internal labor markets to part-time or temporary positions. This tendency has been particularly pronounced in the labor market for new high school graduates.

These macro-level changes are similar to the experience of many other postindustrial economies, allowing us to utilize change in Japan as a "laboratory" to see how high school–work transition processes are affected.

We draw on three original datasets generated for this project: (1) All recruitment advertisements sent by Japanese employers to high schools in a representative urban area in the mid-1990s. We use these data in a network analysis to examine which types of high schools attract the most interest from potential employers. (2) Longitudinal job placement data over two decades for graduates from a sample of these schools. These data illuminate the extent to which high school–employer ties have survived or been buffeted by the macro-level changes outlined above. (3) Qualitative data from interviews with teachers involved in graduates' job placement in 20 high schools. These data inform our general perspective and our quantitative analyses.

We argue from our data that pockets of effectiveness in Japan's school–work system remain: the system appears to be robust for certain types of schools and employers. Our network data from the 1990s show that industrial high schools received many more job opening announcements than general academic high schools. Consistent with this, our longitudinal graduate placement data suggest a significant decline in long-term recruitment relationships between general high schools and firms but the resilience of such ties between industrial high schools and firms.[2] The continued importance of qualified high school graduates for skilled manufacturing jobs seems to underlie the privileged position of industrial high schools. These findings in conjunction with qualitative evidence lead to a number of

[2] We use the terms "general" and "general academic" interchangeably, to refer to high schools that do not have a vocational curriculum.

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