

MEDIA MIX

Media silence on first lady's school visit shows Japan's education gap

By PHILIP BRASOR

Earlier this month, while her husband, the president of the United States, met with other world leaders at the G20 summit, Michelle Obama visited a school for "disadvantaged" girls in North London and was moved to tears by the students' hard work and talent. In an emotional speech, she hailed the young women as the future of the world and identified with them, pointing out that she herself was not raised "with wealth or resources or any social standing to speak of."

The visit received a lot of coverage in the West but very little here in Japan, which didn't strike me as being noteworthy until I read an article in the Sankei Shimbun about a growing trend. In March, four high schools in Saga Prefecture withheld diplomas from graduating students who were delinquent in their tuition payments. A prefectural official said he wanted the students' parents "to fulfill their responsibilities." The article mentioned that similar measures have been taken by high schools in Yamanashi, Yamaguchi and Nagano prefectures.

High school is not compulsory in Japan, and even public high schools require tuition fees. In Tokyo, students have to pay a little more than ¥10,000 a month to attend public high schools. That may not sound like much, but they also have to take a test to get into these schools. If they fail and want to continue their education then they have to attend a private high school, which are, needless to say, more expensive than public high schools — and easier to get into. Basically, all you have to do is pay.

It's an unspoken but generally held belief that private-school students are on the whole scholastically inferior to public-school students. Parents with enough money will send their kids to cram schools at an early age, thus ensuring that they can pass the test to get into a public high school (and, later, a national university), while kids from less affluent families are not able to afford cram schools and thus end up attending private schools, where they have to spend a lot of money in order to graduate. And with more parents losing their jobs due to the recession, more teens are not going on to high school simply because they cannot afford to.

Right now, the media is talking a lot about the book "Kodomo no Hinkon" ("Children's Poverty") by social researcher Aya Abe, who shows a direct correlation between income levels and scholastic achievement. In Chiyoda Ward, 10 percent of elementary- and junior-high-school students receive public assistance, the lowest rate in Tokyo; while in Adachi Ward, 40 percent of the students receive assistance, the highest rate in Tokyo. Not coincidentally, Chiyoda has the highest scholastic achievement results while Adachi has the lowest.

One of Abe's main points is that the current debate over widening income disparities actually reinforces Japan's self-image as a uniformly middle-class society. There has always been a sizable population of families who are decidedly poor in relative terms but who are somehow deemed not-so-poor in the popular imagination. When politicians and the media talk about income disparities in other countries, they use the term *hinpu no sa*, which means "difference between poverty and wealth." When describing Japan's situation, they use the buzz word *kakusa* (gap). The government never talks about alleviating poverty. It only talks about preventing the "gap" from widening so that more middle-class people don't become poorer.

How does this mind set affect schools? So-called free compulsory education for elementary and middle school is not in actuality free. It comes with

mandatory costs that many low-income families cannot meet — uniforms, books, school lunches, field trips. Rather than include these items in the budget or make them optional, schools assume that everybody can pay for them. Those who say they can't are told to apply for government assistance, and in the classroom, everyone knows who is receiving assistance. *Binbo* (poor) is one of the worst things you can call a child.

The word *shogakukin* is always translated as "scholarship." In the West, scholarships are grants given to promising students who don't have the financial means to attend university. They are distinct from student loans, which must be paid back, usually with interest. However, *shogakukin* are nothing more than student loans. In essence, there is no such thing as a "scholarship" in Japan.

Not surprisingly, the *shogakukin* system is now facing problems. In a recent feature in the *Asahi Shimbun*, Shinnosuke Oyama, an official of the main bureaucratic organ that dispenses *shogakukin*, defended its new policy of sending to credit-rating companies the names of students who fall behind in their payments, thus making it difficult for these students to secure credit in the future. Oyama says the loans must be paid back so that funds can be recirculated to the next group of deserving students. He understands that the current recession makes it more difficult for students to pay on time, and in that case the association may grant extensions.

In the same article, a professor named Sadanobu Miwa blasts the *shogakukin* system, pointing out that Japan spends less money on education as a portion of GDP than almost any other developed country. "We need to make a system where poorer children can study without worrying about money," he says.

That's not likely to happen soon. The reason the media didn't cover Michelle Obama's London speech is that her example doesn't have any real meaning in Japan. She is a woman from a working-class family who, thanks to free public schools and scholarships (as well as student loans), was able to graduate from

law school. That doesn't happen here. In Japan, if you are born poor you stay poor — unless, of course, you become a TV personality, in which case you don't require any brains at all.

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