Toward the end of the 1990s attention focused on falling academic level of Japan’s students. The debate touched off at that time led to the conclusion that the relaxed education standards called yutori kyōiku were to blame. Now that new standards are being implemented to roll back the yutori reforms, the time has come to look back at the course this debate has taken over the years.

The 1990s are known as Japan’s “lost decade.” Following the collapse of the bubble economy in the latter half of the 1980s and a succession of missteps by the financial authorities, Japan was left in a prolonged recession. The domino-like collapse of banks and brokerages created financial instability, and along with the bankruptcies came layoffs and the consolidation of the financial industry.

The number of full-time employees with benefits fell as temp staff rose. So-called “freeters” (furītā)—young people employed part-time, typically in a series of short-term noncorporate positions—rose to more than 4 million in 2001. The population of young people classified as NEET, or “not in education, employment, or training,” grew to 750,000 by 2000. With Japanese society already challenged by a low birthrate and aging population, and with the middle-aged concerned about their retirement, young people also found themselves faced with anxiety over the future.

The bubble economy of the 1980s was the final flourish to the period that began with the growth boom starting in 1955 and matured with the steady growth that began toward the end of the 1970s. The expanding bubble saw excessive trust and pride in the Japanese system, with some describing “Japan as number one”; when it eventually popped, it marked the end to Japan’s long stretch of economic stability.

With Japan under the protection of the United States during the Cold War, it was free to pursue economic growth while controlling defense costs. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc from the end of the 1980s through the early 1990s, the Cold War came to an end, ushering in an era of tumultuous change that coincided with the end of Japan’s spectacular growth. At that time worldwide economic restructuring and globalization took place, and debate over international competitiveness continued. The industrial structure in Japan shifted in the 1970s from manufacturing to services, and Japan experienced a rapid changes in its information society in the 1990s.

This was the genesis of Japan’s lost decade. At the end of the 1990s, Japan was trying to digest the lessons of this era, and it launched a heated public discussion on the state of the nation’s education—the “academic decline” debate.
The Debate over Academic Decline

The declining scholastic abilities of Japan’s children and university students—formerly ranked at the top of the world—is said to be a failure of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) policy of yutori kyōiku, or “education that gives children room to grow,” yutori meaning “relaxed” or “pressure-free.”

Debate was first sparked by the government’s plans to introduce new “Courses of Study,” the national educational guidelines, in 2002. Among other reforms, these new guidelines aimed to enable a new five-day school week—reduced from six—by cutting the educational requirements by a third in an attempt to relieve the stress placed on Japanese children and students. But concern grew that this would actually lead to a drop in scholastic ability.

This debate differed greatly from past disagreements over education. The main sources of opposition to MEXT educational policy had been the Japan Teachers’ Union and left-leaning scholars and thinkers backing the socialists and communists.

This time protest would come from universities. And rather than educational researchers or arts instructors, it was the math and science instructors who were speaking out.

In 1998 and 1999, the Mathematical Society of Japan tested the students of top Japanese schools like Kyoto University and Keiō University in elementary- and middle-school-level math, with dismal results. The lack of mathematics in private university entrance exams (especially for the departments of law, economics, literature, and so on), a decline in liberal arts education, and yutori kyōiku were all seen as causes. Math and science instructors, as well as Japanese “cram schools,” special schools that prepare students for college entrance exams, provided data demonstrating the decline.

Wada Hideki, a psychologist and author of many entrance exam prep guides, had long been an opponent of those who argued against education geared toward entrance exams, as well as of yutori policy. The United States and Britain had actually reversed similar yutori policy in the 1980s, and Wada thus criticized Japanese policy as retrogressive. He also predicted that academic decline would destroy Japan’s foundation as a scientific and technological power, and that the nation would be confronted with a choice between a future in which it was led by an upper-class elite and a future where the public was in forced universal competition for spots at its universities.

The focus of discussion shifted from the universities to compulsory primary education, and then to the high-school level. In Tokyo and other major cities throughout the country, private schools integrating the middle and high school years and cram schools for middle school entrance exams launched large-scale PR campaigns warning of the dire effects of yutori kyōiku on public school students, causing concern among parents.

Educational scholars did not take a leading role in this debate, for the most part. One exception was Kariya Takehiko, an educational sociologist then at the University of Tokyo. He fleshed out the relationship between education and social class—traditionally a taboo subject—indicating
both a reduction in study time by middle and high school students and the possibility that the
diversity and personal responsibility touted by yutori policy would actually expand gaps in social
class.

The education ministry also helped to fuel the debate. Terawaki Ken worked to promote and
preserve yutori kyōiku during his tenure as MEXT policy chief. Terawaki broke from traditional
bureaucratic parlance, speaking instead in plain language about the ministry’s approach. His
straight talk included the statement that the national educational guidelines were meant to serve
as minimum standards, which shocked educators who had been treating them as definitions of
the total curriculum. (Indeed, Terawaki would go on to note also that this was simply the ideal,
and the guidelines in fact tended to define the maximum extend of curriculum coverage.) It was
increasingly evident that there were problems in the top-down issuance of instructions from
MEXT to local boards of education, bodies intended to be coequal. Private schools, meanwhile,
used the idea that the guidelines formed a bare minimum to position themselves as offering elite
education, while casting public schools as responsible for low-performing students.

The Education Ministry Backs Down

It was in 2000 that the debate began to intensify. Participants brought forth a wide variety of
arguments as to the cause, but were agreed that the decline in academic performance was for
real. Gradually opinion began to coalesce around the yutori kyōiku initiated in the 1980s as its
cause.

The academic guidelines at issue were enforced as planned in April 2002. Just before this,
MEXT issued its “Recommendation for Learning,” which called strongly for “a definite
improvement in scholastic achievement.” The yutori concept made no appearance in this
recommendation—a shift in policy for MEXT, which was effectively stepping back from its
previous championing of the relaxed approach. It also put an end to the debate for the time being.
More recently, the latest guidelines going into effect from fiscal 2012 (beginning in April 2012)
have increased class hours and restored much of the previously scrapped curriculum.

From beginning to end, however, this debate never reached a clear definition or understanding of
the true nature of “academic ability.” Nor did we ever see any concrete data to show its steady
decline among Japanese students. The Program for International Student Assessment, a survey
carried out by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, showed Japanese
academic ability dropping slightly in both 2003 and 2006, but rising in 2007. The Trends in
International Mathematics and Science Study also showed a drop in 2003 and a rebound in 2007.

Taking a broad overview of the entire debate, we can see that it did begin with actual data. As
traditional patterns of ideological opposition broke down, the facts that had been concealed by
the standoff between right- and left-leaning forces in the education field came to the fore,
touching off a debate of real substance. Discussion of academic matters soon went beyond the
limited field of education to encompass a broad range of issues facing Japan’s society as a
whole, including the economic neoliberalism and new brand of conservatism championed by
Koizumi Jun’ichirō while he was prime minister (2001–6), widening gaps between the “haves”
and “have-nots,” and the nation’s international competitiveness in the age of globalization.
This was the most wide-reaching popular debate over education in Japan in the postwar era. It grew into more than a discussion about learning: it was an examination of Japanese society itself, marking a key shift in the zeitgeist.

But why was education, especially *yutori kyōiku* and “academic ability,” the focus? To answer this question, we must look back at the history of Japan’s postwar reconstruction and economic growth.

**Strong Economic Growth and “Exam Hell”**

In August 1945 Japan was a nation that had lost everything. After its inclusion in the community of nations led by the United States after the war, though, it enjoyed a rapid, dramatic recovery. The country maintained annual growth of 10% or more for almost 20 years in what has been termed an economic miracle. It was even able to maintain 5% growth from 1975 through 1980 despite the oil shocks in 1973 and 1979. Japan’s GDP rose to second position behind that of the United States as it succeeded in creating a truly affluent society.

High-level education, a cornerstone of Japanese society since the Meiji Restoration of 1868, drove this growth. The fundamentals of “reading, writing, and the abacus” played a key role in economic growth and industrialization, driving Japan’s push to “catch up” with Western economies. The school curriculum was enhanced after World War II to match the needs of the time, further bolstering growth. At its heart this was an efficient “force-fed” form of education: a high-pressure, rote-memorization approach to learning that crammed as much knowledge as possible into the heads of Japanese students.

The country’s economic development brought big changes to Japanese education in the postwar years. First, there was a sharp rise in the rate of students going on to high school and college. Fully 98% of students went on to high school, and roughly 50%—a figure that rose to to 80% when including technical schools—went on to tertiary education. Graduating from a good university meant the guarantee of joining a good company and a happy, stable life, with large companies offering lifetime employment and regular promotions based on seniority. The pursuit of this stability in the workplace was what drove Japan’s “education-background society,” or *gakureki shakai*.

This system positioned college entrance exams as the dominant factor in all of Japanese education. It transformed high schools into entrance-exam prep schools, with many students studying late into the night at privately run cram schools in their fight through “exam hell” or “exam war,” popular epithets for the phenomenon. This in turn affected how students chose high schools, with similar competition appearing in tests to enter the high schools that sent the most students to the best universities. In the 1960s and 1970s, to prevent overly intense competition for limited high school spots, Tokyo and other major cities introduced systems to smooth out the curve in academic ability among students entering public high schools. The idea was to prevent the more capable students from being concentrated at select schools. This in turn made well-heeled parents less confident in public education, boosting the popularity of combined private schools integrating the middle and high school years. As a result, the exam war at the middle school entrance phase only intensified in major cities.
This intensification has resulted in some students being left behind. The phrase “7, 5, 3” emerged to describe the ratios of students who actually understood their classes—70% of elementary school students, 50% of middle schoolers, and 30% of high schoolers. A raft of problems in the school environment began to come to public attention: misbehavior, violence, bullying, and habitual nonattendance, to name a few.

Japan’s gakureki shakai, exam hell, and the whole system of force-fed education were seen as likely causes for these problems. Educational debates and reforms throughout the 1970s and 1980s sought to address these problems, leading eventually to the creation of yutori kyōiku. Educators refined and pared down the curriculum in attempts to relieve stress, address misbehavior, and prevent students from being left behind. College entrance exams were changed, high school programs diversified, and teaching made more flexible through increases in the number of elective classes.

There was another important characteristic to the educational reforms of the 1980s, namely, an attempt at modernization. The information age of the twenty-first century required different academic skills. Instead of the standardized, memorization-based education seen as essential during the “catch-up” years, self-driven learning and individual thought built on a foundation of hands-on education and problem solving became the focus. This new approach, the product of
intense debate by the Provisional Council on Educational Reform led by Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro, became one aspect of what came to be known as *yutori kyōiku*.

But how this new approach would address the issues facing Japan’s troubled schools remained unclear. How exactly new academic skills differed from and related to the traditional approach was also uncertain; phrases like “a focus on individuality,” “the power to choose,” and “life skills” were insufficiently clear guides to settle the issue. Schools were stumped when it came to putting these concepts into practice.

It was the desire to confront the problems inherent in *yutori kyōiku* head on that touched off the debate over declining academic skills beginning in the late 1990s.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>“Force-fed” education</strong></th>
<th><strong>Yutori kyōiku</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overemphasis on learned knowledge</td>
<td>Emphasis on “life skills” of self-driven learning and individual thought</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on fundamentals; methodical learning approaches</td>
<td>Hands-on education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One-size-fits-all instruction</td>
<td>Focus on problem-solving, individuality, diversity, choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Exam hell” and <em>gakureki shakai</em></td>
<td>Fewer defined goals, less study time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equality of opportunity, uniform experience provided to all students</td>
<td>Inequality in education provided; uniformity crumbles, gaps widen between echelons of students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tight central regulation, national uniformity in education</td>
<td>Deregulation of academic programs, increased regional authority leads to widening interregional gaps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prewar elite/common dual-track system scrapped for single-track system</td>
<td>Partial return to dual-track advancement system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Designed for industrializing society; supports high economic growth</td>
<td>Designed for information society, increasing internationalization</td>
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**Changing Children and Concerned Adults**

A big change was seen in Japanese children starting in the 1990s—they quit studying. They had no future aspirations and little desire to progress in school. The number of “freeters” and NEET youths rose. Teachers were unable to run proper classes as students misbehaved and failed to follow instructions.

One cause for this development was the collapse of Japan’s *gakureki shakai*. The prolonged economic downturn had forced companies to pare back worker counts, throwing a wrench into the finely tuned gears of the Japanese corporate model premised on lifetime employment and steady, seniority-based steps up the ladder. The promise of a life of blue skies after graduation from a good school began to fade. Dwindling student numbers, meanwhile, resulting from the declining birthrate, meant the onset of an era when college admissions were less competitive than ever.
The previously unseen positives of the *gakureki shakai* and exam hell came to light. Namely, the goals of a strong education and being accepted to a good university had motivated everyone to study. As a result, Japan successfully elevated its academic fundamentals to a world-leading level and “caught up” in magnificent fashion, achieving the world’s number-two economy and a level of affluence rivaling that of the West.

But Japan did not succeed solely in becoming rich—it also managed to create an egalitarian society. GDP shot up, and not only did the size of the pie increase but everyone got a piece. Academic skills went up, and the number of students going on to high school and college rose across the board. No large social gaps were formed; everyone shared the wealth, and most Japanese considered themselves “middle class”—the realization of an egalitarian society. This preserved a strong collective conscience of the nation as one, working together.

Today those values are no longer in evidence. Japan’s economy grows more slowly today; the pie is getting smaller, and everyone must fight harder for a piece. Class differences are beginning to crack the long-standing societal foundation of egalitarianism. Students are studying less and have less hope for the future. Classrooms are breaking down; more students are skipping school, and “freeter” and NEET numbers are on the rise. Young people are no longer venting their frustrations openly, as they previously did in the form of misbehavior and delinquency; we are now seeing more of them internalize their problems. In doing so they mirror Japan’s adults, who are increasingly suffering from depression.

In some respects, public concern over children’s school performance is a reflection of adults’ own worries. This has added an element of hysteria to the debate—overtones, even, of fear that we are in danger of losing our very nation. In this atmosphere of epidemic unease, it is little surprise that this educational debate has transfixed the entire country.

In times like this, there is invariably a rising urge to go back to a former era; to return to the “good old days.” This is a tendency societies always see in times of great change.

But this is of course impossible. In the past, students were sufficiently inspired by the goals of achieving a solid academic history and getting into a good university. But these were effective motivators only in an age of poverty. When the national target was the process of industrialization and catching up to the West, the fundamentals—basic academic skills—were the key. With that process complete, though, higher-level skills and a new way of life are needed. Looking back on them today, we can see the positive aspects of Japan’s *gakureki shakai* and exam hell. But their benefits are clear only in hindsight; they are now legacies of a past to which we can no longer return.

**The Lost Years and Less Competent Adults**

Based on the above, we can now consider the roles of academic ability and *yutori kyōiku* in the context of the overall discussion of declining academic skills.

What is at issue now is not the academic decline of Japan’s children. It is a bigger, more fundamental change stemming not from *yutori kyōiku* but from broader shifts in the world and
Japan as a whole. *Yutori kyōiku* was at best a response to these changes; as far as its intentions go, this approach was correct. But the problem was that results failed to follow.

The first reason for this was a failure to identify the correct relationship between the academic skills required to catch up to the West and those required after that process was complete—a recognition that the former were one essential component of the latter, and not something to be replaced by a different set of skills to succeed them.

Secondly, academic skills had to be translated into actual ability, and a much higher standard of ability was called for compared to the past. Strict discipline and training would be required to achieve this ability, which was something never verbalized by anyone. Furthermore, the talents called for in the new era were not simply enhancements to the talents of yesteryear; their mastery required changes in ways of thinking and, indeed, in ways of life.

The third factor was that there were extraordinarily few teachers, or adults in any field, who could offer effective guidance from the perspective of the life changes that were called for. The need for people with this ability was something everyone failed to predict.

In short, the problem is not that Japanese children have seen their academic ability plummet. It is that we adults have fallen short in the abilities needed to educate them. Our own lives are not up to par in this respect. The academic ability and ways of life that children display are nothing more than reflections of adults’ inadequacies.

The problem now facing Japan is one of identity. Having achieved affluence, it does not know where to go next. The type of ability required now is the ability to envision a new future and move toward it. The country now needs the capacity to create new values, new goals for society, and the organization and lifestyles required to achieve them—but unfortunately, these are abilities that Japanese adults do not have.

Ten years after the end of debate over the decline in Japanese education, Japanese society still lacks vision. The two decades from the start of the 1990s through today are known as Japan’s “lost years.” The March 11 Tōhoku earthquake and resulting nuclear disaster were physical and psychological shocks to a Japan long since set adrift. We as Japanese can only hope to transform the tragedy into a chance for renewal.

(*) Educational commentator and head of Keimei Gakuen, a supplementary school focusing on Japanese language studies. Born in 1954. After graduating from Kyoto University, carried out independent research on Japanese language and writing education while offering critiques of the educational reforms rolled out from the 1990s on. His works include *Kōkō ga umarekawaru* (High Schools Reborn), *Ronsō: Gakuryoku hōkai* (The Controversy over Collapsing Academic Abilities), and *Daigaku nyūshi no sengoshi* (A Postwar History of University Entrance Exams)

(**) The Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture was responsible for education policy through 2001, when it became MEXT as a result of a series of reforms to the central government bureaucracy. This piece uses MEXT in reference to both.