



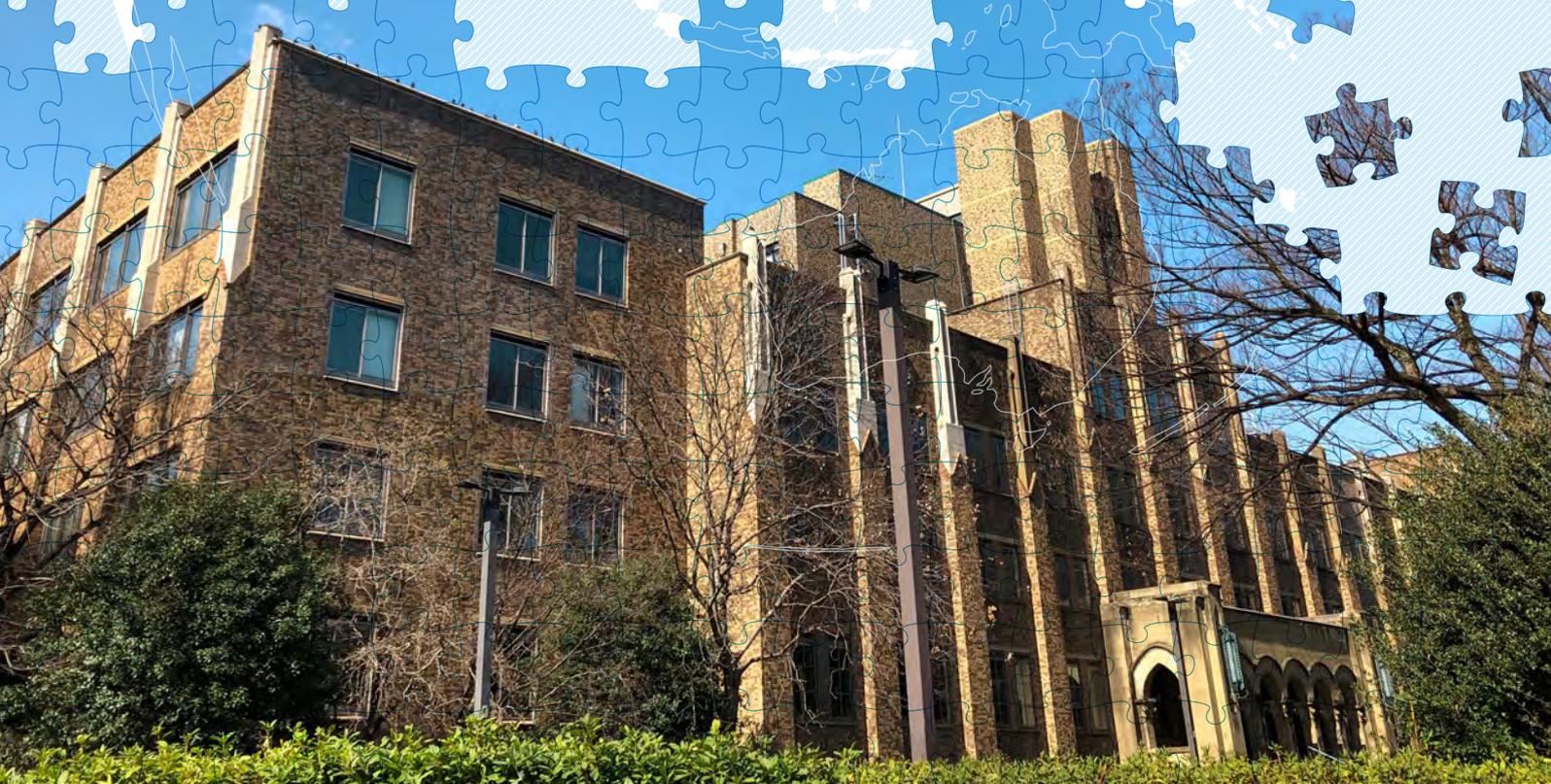
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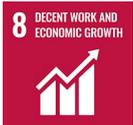
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# CSRDA Discussion Paper

## Understanding Transition from High School to Work



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# **Understanding Transition from High School to Work**

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## **Abstract**

This study examines the process of the transition from high school to work among Japanese youth. It focuses on the role of high schools in shaping the unequal distribution of the four outcomes of their first jobs: the timing of job entry, employment status, firm size and whether the job was first preference. The empirical evidence of this study suggests that Japanese high schools continue to play an active role in matching students to jobs, and that there is no apparent decline in the use of the school-mediated system or the effects of using such a system on labor market outcomes. Contrary to the observations by the Japanese mass media and some academics, the idea of the breakdown of the school-mediated transition to work does not receive much empirical support.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

This study examines the process of transition from high school to work, and how it is related to social inequality. I will examine the activities leading to a job and their impact on the outcomes of the job search. In examining the process of transition from school to work, I will focus on the role played by school institutions in matching students and jobs. Japanese schools have been well-known for their active role in mediating the job-matching process (Brinton 2010; Chiavacci 2005; Oshima 2012). Recent observations by the Japanese mass media and academic fields alike emphasize changes in the process of this transition in Japan. Some argue that the traditional assistance provided by schools has disappeared, and individual students are left alone to find their own strategies in the job search. The key terms among the proponents of change are individual choice and responsibility. With the influence of neo-liberal thinking, individual youth are expected to take the initiative in their job search, without relying on the existing institutions, and at the same time they are expected to take full responsibility of the outcomes of their search.

Honda (2005) claims that around the mid-1990s, the school-mediated transition to work which is characteristic of Japanese society began to crumble and threatened to collapse. Schools were no longer equipped to assist students. In addition to the macro-economic condition, Honda blames the school-mediated transition for the deterioration of employment opportunities among the young people and claims that schools should no longer act as a mediator. The school-mediated job search system deprives students of the freedom and responsibility to choose their occupational destiny. Honda (2005, 2009) concludes that schools failed to impart skills that are relevant to occupational success, and that employers bore the cost of training students with necessary skills. Schools focused on establishing long-term relationships with employers at the expense of preparing high school students for long-term occupational careers. Students concentrated on receiving good grades and attendance records which led to recommendations from their school to advantageous companies. However, they were deprived of the opportunity to acquire occupational skills which are necessary for obtaining long-term occupational careers.

These claims regarding significant changes regarding the role of school often require heavy qualifications. Other recent studies do not support the idea of the breakdown of the school-mediated transition to the workforce (Brinton 2010; Ishida 2014; Ogawa 2021). Schools continue to aid students, and the breakdown of school-mediated transition is greatly overestimated. I argue that the process of obtaining a job is embedded in the existing institutions, and further that those institutions, namely schools, can help alleviate the formation of social inequality. The apparent changes that are often emphasized in the media are not accurately representative of the underlying mechanism.

## **TRANSITION FROM HIGH SCHOOL TO WORK**

Japan has been praised for its low level of youth unemployment and the smooth transition from school to work up until the mid-1990s. Japanese students have been generally successful in moving into the labor market in an orderly fashion, immediately following school graduation. The main reason for this successful transition was ascribed to the active role played by schools in the process of matching students and jobs. The prototype of the school-mediated transition originated in the 1950s (Kariya, Sugayama, and Ishida 2000; Sugayama 2011) and was firmly established in the 1980s (Kariya 1991).

Recently, however, the school-mediated system has been subject to criticism. Hori (2016) claims that the practice of delegated selection by schools and long-term relationship between employers and schools was not as widespread as earlier studies (e.g. Kariya 1991) indicated. There were also regional variations in the practice of school mediation. Otawa (2014) argues that the assistance provided by schools was characterized as “school-led selection and allocation” in the 1980s but it has now changed to “student-centered support” which emphasizes consultation with students rather than allocation of students. Hori (2016) shows that high schools characterized by “student-centered support” are mostly found in metropolitan areas and are not widely spread across the nation.

In this study, I concentrate on the question of whether the school-mediated system still exists in contemporary Japan, and whether the system makes a difference in the outcomes (that is, the kinds of jobs students obtain). Before presenting empirical findings, I will first provide some background information.

Figure 1 shows the trends of destinations of high school graduates (percentage by destinations after high school graduation). Obtaining a job following high school graduation constituted the most popular destination until the 1980s. However, the rate has declined sharply due to the expansion of the higher education sector during the 1990s, and today about 20 percent of high school graduates obtain full-time jobs and move directly into the labor market. Figure 2 presents the ratios of job openings to job applicants for high school graduates. If the ratio is 1.0, this means that the number of job openings is equal to the number of job applicants, and ratios greater than 1 mean that there are more job openings than applicants. Although the ratios over this period are all greater than 1, the ratio has always been below 2 since the mid-1990s except for the last four years, reflecting the economic downturn.

It is therefore true that the number and proportion of high school students who go through the school-mediated job search process have been decreasing, and the labor market for high school graduates has been stagnating from the mid-1990s to early part of 2010s. However, this does not necessarily mean that the school-mediated process has completely broken down, or that the advantages associated with the school-mediated process have disappeared. I will argue that high school students continue to use school-mediated process to find first jobs, and that the labor market benefits of school-mediated transition persist.

## **DATA AND VARIABLES**

The data set for this study comes from the Japanese Life Course Panel Surveys (JLPS). The JLPS is a panel study which follows up young people who were aged 20 to 34 in 2007 (the youth sample) and the middle-aged who were 35 to 40 in 2007 (the middle-aged sample) in Japan. The first wave of the JLPS was conducted between January and April of 2007. The youth and middle-aged samples were drawn from the population using the electoral and resident registries so that they are representative of the respective age groups in the population. The questionnaires were sent by mail to those who agreed to take part in the first and follow-up surveys. The staff from a professional survey organization picked up the questionnaires at a later date. The response rate for the youth sample was 35%, with 3,367 responses, and the response rate for the middle-aged sample was 40%, with 1,433 responses. The JLPSs have been conducted every year since 2007, and the retention rates have been about 80% for the youth sample and 87% for the middle-aged sample (see Ishida et al., 2008, Ishida et al., 2009, and Yamamoto and Ishida 2010 for details of the JLPS).

The supplementary sample was added in 2011 to compensate for the attrition in the original sample drawn in 2007. The respondents were drawn from the same population and with the same method as the 2007 respondents. However, the questionnaires were sent and returned by mail, not collected by the staff from a survey organization due to financial reasons. The response rate for the youth sample was 32%, with 710 responses, and the response rate for the middle-aged sample was 31%, with 253 responses. These respondents have been followed up every year since 2011.

In 2019 the refresh youth sample aged 20 to 31 in 2019 was added because the original respondents were already 32 to 52 in 2019. The refresh sample allows us to compare the youth aged 20 to 31 in 2007 and 2019. The sampling methods were identical to the 2007 survey, and the questionnaires were sent by mail and collected by the staff from a professional survey organization at a later date. The response rate for the refresh sample was 31%, with 2049 responses. These respondents have been followed up every year since 2019.

My analyses targeted respondents who graduated from high school and began employment because I focused on the transition from high school to work. Those who went on for further education (technical schools, junior colleges, and universities) were excluded from the analyses. The respondents in the 2007 original survey, the 2011 supplementary survey, and the 2019 refresh survey were combined. There were 1855 high school graduates with valid responses to the school mediation question.

The use of the school-mediated job search is the main independent variable. It was determined by the following survey question: “how did you get to know your first job?” The following responses were coded as school mediation: “through teachers at schools where you graduated (including school recommendation).” The proportion represents those who found their first job through schools.

There are four outcome variables: the timing of the start of the first job, whether the first job was something the respondent desired, the firm size of the first job, and the employment status of the first job. The survey did not ask the question of entry wages. Respondents who began working immediately following school graduation were given the score of 1 and zero otherwise. Over 85 percent of the respondents began working immediately after graduation. Respondents who never worked after school graduation were excluded from the analysis. Respondents were asked if their first job was the job which they had desired before they started working. Those who replied positively to this question were given a score of 1 and zero otherwise. About one half of the respondents had a score of 1. The firm size of the first place of employment was classified into two groups: (1) large firms with 300 or more employees and the public sector, and (2) small firms which employed less than 300 employees. About 40 percent of respondents worked in large firms. Finally, the employment status of the first job was classified into two groups: (1) regular employment and (2) non-regular employment. Regular employment includes managers and owners, employees working full-time, and self-employed and family workers. Non-regular employment includes those who worked part-time, temporary staff, contract workers, and those with side jobs. About 80 percent of the respondents had regular employment.

Several control variables are used in my analyses. Two demographic variables, gender of the respondent and birth cohort, are included. The respondents were divided into three cohorts: those born between 1987 and 1998 (those who were aged 20 to 31 in 2019), those born between 1975 and 1986 (those who were aged 20 to 31 in 2007), and those born between 1966 and 1974 (those who were aged 32 to 40 in 2007). The comparison of the first two cohorts implies the change among the same age group (aged 21 to 31) between 2007 and 2019. The youngest cohort members (born between 1987 and 1998) are respondents of the

refresh youth sample conducted in 2019. The next youngest cohort members (born between 1975 and 1986) roughly correspond to the youth sample of the 2007 continuous survey and the 2010 supplementary survey.

Five variables are introduced as social backgrounds. The father's and the mother's education take the score of 1 when the respondents' fathers and mothers attended institutions of higher education (both junior colleges and universities) and 0 otherwise. Dummy variables indicating missing on the father's and the mother's education are also included. The living standard when the respondents were 15 years old takes the value from 1 poor to 5 wealthy. The number of books at home is used as a measure of cultural resources at home. The atmosphere at home captures how warm the home environment was when the respondent was growing up and takes the values of 1 "not warm," 2 "if anything, not warm," 3 "if anything, warm," and 4 "warm atmosphere."

Finally, two school characteristics are introduced as control. The type of high school where the respondent attended is classified into two groups: (1) academic high schools and (2) vocational and other high schools. High school grade is used as a control variable, classified as either above average or otherwise. The statistical methods used in this paper are cross-tabulation, ordinary least-square regression, and logistic regression.

## FINDINGS

Figure 3 shows the percentage of high school graduates who used schools to obtain their first job after high school by birth cohort. There are slight variations in the percentage by cohort: 51 percent of high school graduates in the youngest birth cohort (born from 1987 to 1998) which corresponds to the refresh youth sample (respondents aged 20 to 31 in 2019), 40 percent in the 1975-1986 birth cohort (respondents aged 20 to 31 in 2007), and 46 percent in the 1966-1974 birth cohort (respondents aged 32 to 40 in 2007). Even among the youngest cohort, the majority of high school graduates still relied on schools in their job search. The evidence is not consistent with the claim that the school-mediated job search has completely disappeared in recent times.

We next examine the outcomes of the job search and observe whether there were any differences between school-mediated searches and non-mediated searches. The first outcome examined is whether high school graduates were able to start working immediately following graduation. Figure 4 shows that 97-99 percent of those who found their first jobs through school started working on April 1st, immediately following graduation, while the percentages for those who found their first jobs without the assistance of school are much less: 71 percent for the two youngest samples and 82 percent for the middle-aged sample. Schools seem to help the smooth transition to work among high school students.

The second outcome is whether the respondent's first job was his or her preference. The majority (51 percent of the youngest cohort, 59 percent of the next youngest cohort, and 57 percent of the middle-aged cohort) of those who found their first jobs through school reported that their jobs were their first preference. The percentage is much smaller for those who did not use the school to find their first jobs.

Two other types of labor market outcome are considered. Figure 6 shows the firm size of the first job. The percentage of those who found their first jobs in large firms (those with more than 300 employees) and the public sector is clearly different between graduates who used the school to find jobs and those who did not. The percentage of those who worked in large firms and the public sector are at least fifteen percent higher among students who used

school assistance.

Finally, the percentage of those who found full-time regular employment is shown according to whether the respondent used the school to find a job or not. Among the middle-aged sample, the difference is 25 percent. However, among the two youngest cohorts, school mediation made a large difference. If high school graduates did not use the school mediation process, their chances of finding a regular job were greatly reduced by more than 40 percent to 50 percent.

All these results lead us to conclude that school mediation offers significantly better job opportunities in contemporary Japan. The effects of school mediation are still apparent even among the youngest cohort, and there is no clear sign of the effects being reduced in the recent period. Although the effects of school mediation on four outcomes are striking, there is the possibility that those who used school mediation are already specific kinds of people. For example, if students who used school mediation are those who were more able and had good grades, and if students who did not use school mediation are those who were not successful in academic work, then the effect of school mediation is likely to be overestimated. The effect may simply reflect the fact that students who used school mediation were able students to begin with and that it is not the school mediation which produced the apparent effect. Since school grades are used as one of the important criteria for internal selection of students, we must consider the possibility that the academic achievement of students is responsible for the effect of school mediation.

Figure 8 shows the relationship between school grades and the use of school mediation. It is indeed the case that students with above-average grades are more likely to use school mediation in their job search than those with lower grades.

Another confounding factor which we need to take into account is school types. If the students from a particular type of school are more likely to use school mediation than those from other types of school, then the effect of mediation is likely to be overestimated by the effect of school types. Figure 9 shows the relationship between school types and the use of school mediation. Students from vocational schools are more likely to use school mediated placement than those from academic schools, probably because vocational schools tend to have stronger long-term linkages with particular employers than academic schools. This difference is more pronounced among high school graduates who left school in recent periods.

I now address the question about the apparent effect of school mediation can be explained by school grades and school types. To do this, I examine the effect of school mediation after controlling for (1) gender and cohort, (2) gender, cohort, and social background, and (3) all variables including school type and school grade. These factors are assumed to be causally prior to school mediation. By controlling for these factors, we can estimate the net causal effect of school mediation.

Figure 10 presents the effects of school mediation on the timing of obtaining first jobs after various controls are introduced. The results are based on running a series of OLS regression without and with different control variables. I show the results of combining three birth cohorts because the results are consistent across three cohorts. The bars indicate the difference in the percentage of high school graduates who obtained first job immediately following graduation between those who used mediation and those who did not. When there is no control, the difference is about 22 percent: students who found their first jobs through school mediation are 22 percent more likely to start working immediately after graduation than those who found jobs without the assistance of school. The effects of school mediation hardly change after the introduction of various controls. Even after controlling for all the

causally prior variables, the difference is 19 percent.

Figure 11 shows the effect of school mediation on whether the first jobs were the students' first preference. The effect of school mediation hardly changes from 15 percent with no control to 13 percent with all control variables. The effect of school mediation on the first job preference appears to be smaller than its effect on the timing of starting the first job, but it is still significant and does not change by the introduction of controls.

Figure 12 presents the effect of school mediation on firm size. When there is no control, the school mediation increases the chances of being employed in large firms by 18 percent, while after all variables are controlled, the same chances are 13 percent. Although the magnitude of the effects is not substantial, these effects are statistically significant, and do not change greatly even with controls.

Figure 13 presents the effects of school mediation on employment status. The effect is substantial when compared with the effect on firm size: school mediation increases the chances of regular employment by 36 percent when there is no control and by 34 percent when all the variables are controlled. Again, the size of the effect does not change very much after the introduction of control variables.

All these figures indicate that the effects of school mediation are largely independent of gender, cohort, school type, and most importantly, school grade. Although students with good grades are more likely to use school mediation, the benefits of school mediation are apparent both for students with good grades and those without good grades.

We cannot completely rule out the possibility of unobserved heterogeneity between students who used mediation and those who did not. However, at least drawing from the measurements available in the survey, the effects of school mediation are robust and are not greatly affected by factors which are causally prior to school mediation.

Finally, I consider the question of who actually uses the school-mediated search. In particular, I examine whether the use of the school-mediated job search is related to students' social backgrounds. Figure 14 presents the results of running the logistic regression of the use of school mediation on a range of social background variables. The dots indicate the estimates (log odds ratios), and the lines indicate the 95 percent confidence interval. None of the social background variables exert significant effects at 5 percent significance level. The effect of living standard when the respondent was 15 years old is significant at 10 percent level: the higher the economic well-being, the lower the likelihood of using the school-mediated placement. Students from economically advantaged families may have familial resources to assist students and are less likely to use the assistance from schools than those from economically disadvantaged families. Therefore, the access of school-mediated assistance appears to be open to everyone regardless of social background. High schools, which mediate the job-matching process among students, are indeed providing assistance to all high school graduates including those from less advantaged families, and possibly alleviating the negative consequences associated with coming from disadvantaged backgrounds.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the process of the transition from high school to work among young Japanese people. It focused on the role of schools in shaping the unequal distribution of the outcomes of their first jobs. Previous studies pointed out that Japanese schools played an active role in mediating the job-matching process among students. However, some recent

observations by the Japanese mass media and academics emphasized changes in the process of transition in Japan. Some argue that the traditional assistance provided by schools has disappeared and that schools are no longer able to influence the outcomes of the job search. Schools are unable to assist students in providing favorable job outcomes when the students leave school. Without institutional support, students are left with harsh labor market conditions and suffer from deteriorating employment opportunities.

These recent remarks are empirically evaluated by this study. The evidence of this study suggests that Japanese schools continue to play an active role in matching students to jobs, and that there is no apparent decline in the use of the school-mediated system or the effects of using such a system. The idea of the breakdown of the school-mediated transition to work does not receive much empirical support.

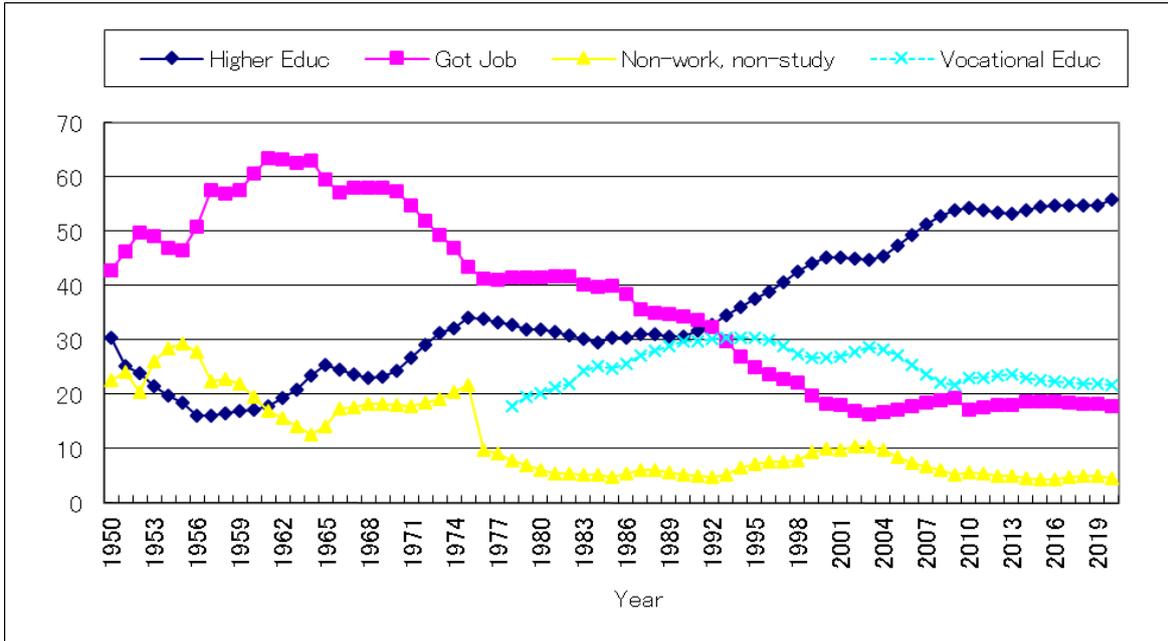
Critics of the school-mediated system claim that schools should not adopt the responsibility of placing students because they interfere with the notions of individual freedom and responsibility. However, these critics do not fully recognize the fact that the students coming from less advantaged social origins are those who benefit most from the school-mediated system because the access to the assistance provided by school is not restricted by social backgrounds. Dismantling the system will further disadvantage those who are already underprivileged in society.

In conclusion, I would like to stress the importance of the role played by institutions in understanding the transition experienced by Japanese youth. Institutions such as schools have the potential for affecting the life opportunities of the individual at particular transitional stages, breaking the cycle of cumulative disadvantages. The proportion of high school graduates who directly move into the labor market after graduation has been shrinking since the 1980s and stayed at about 18 percent in the 2000s. They are clearly the socially disadvantaged minority who have limited educational resources. It is possible that Japanese schools have contributed to alleviating the reproduction of social inequality and acted as a safety-net for the socially disadvantaged. Only through recognizing the role played by institutions are we able to understand the mechanisms through which social inequality is produced and reproduced in Japanese society.

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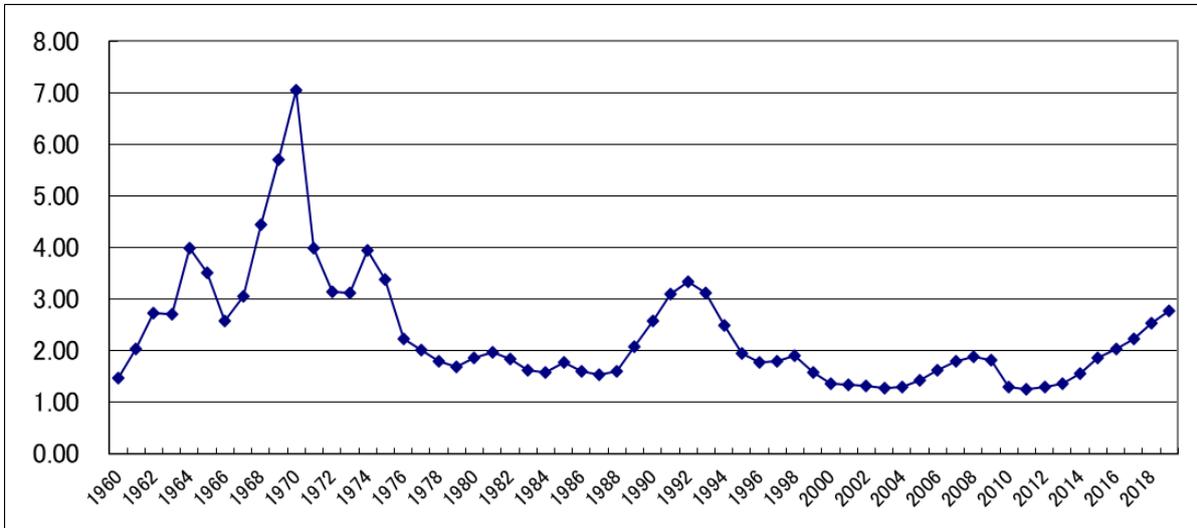
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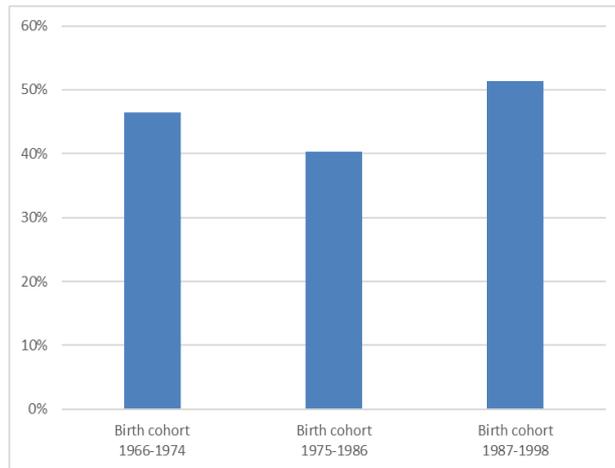
**Figure 1. Destinations of High School Graduates, 1950-2020**

Source: Ministry of Education, *Gakko Kihon Chosa* (Basic Survey of Schools) (Tokyo: Ministry of Education, various years)

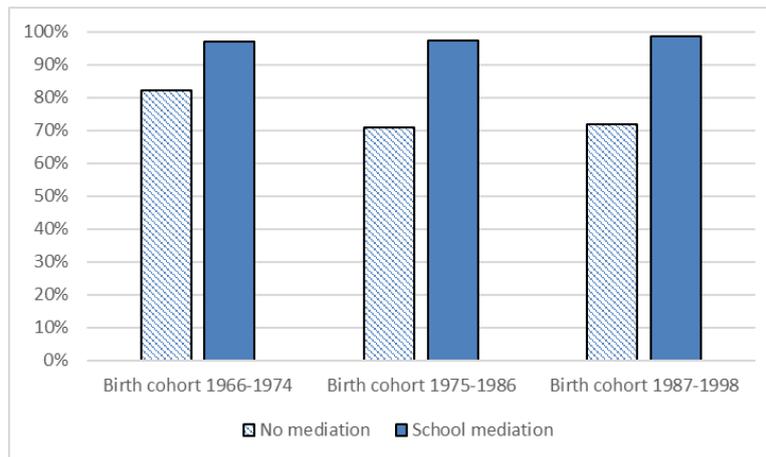


**Figure 2. Rate of Job Openings to Job Applicants for High School Graduates 1955-2019**

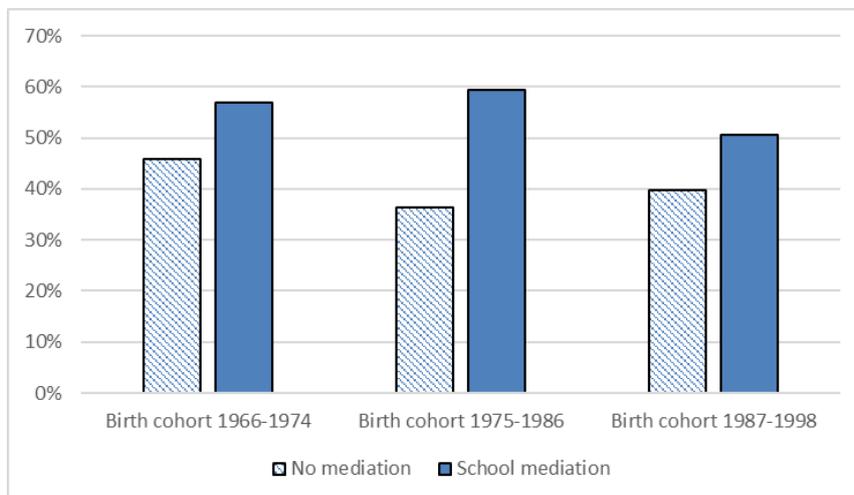
Source: Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, *Shokugyo Anteikyoku: Shinki Gakusotsusha no Rodo Shijyo* (Labor Market of New Graduates) (Tokyo: Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, various years)



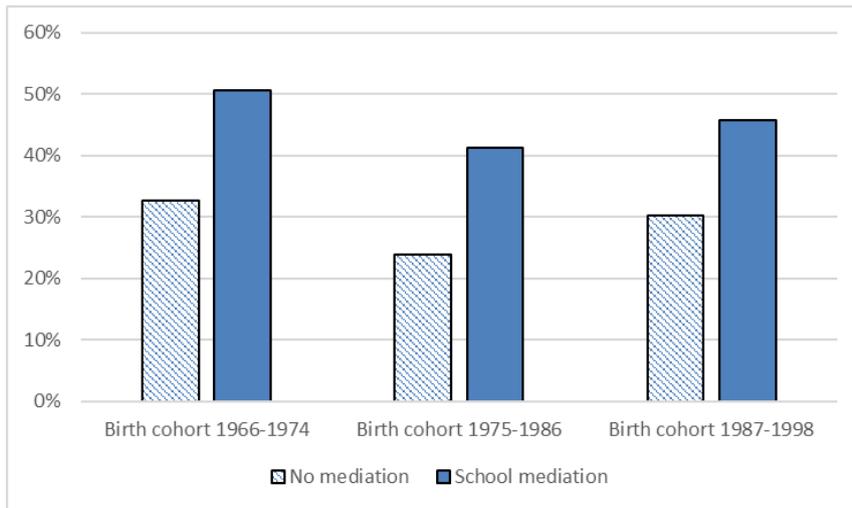
**Figure 3. The Percentage of School Mediation among High School Graduates by Birth Cohort**



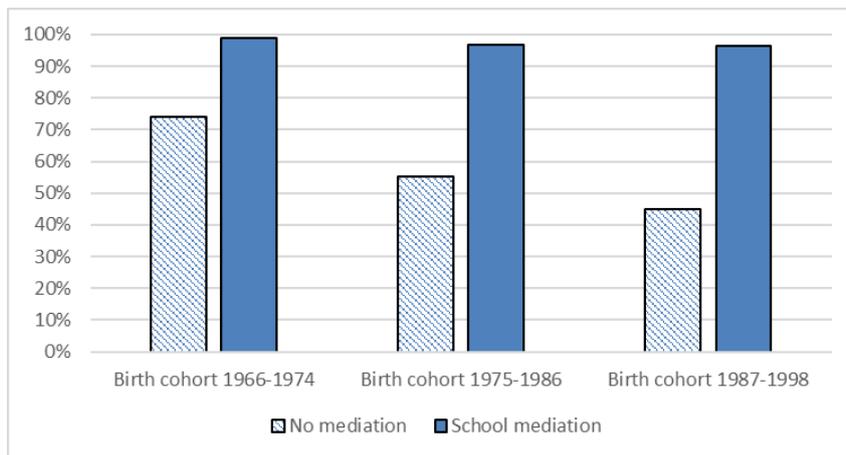
**Figure 4. School Mediation and the Timing of Start of First Job**



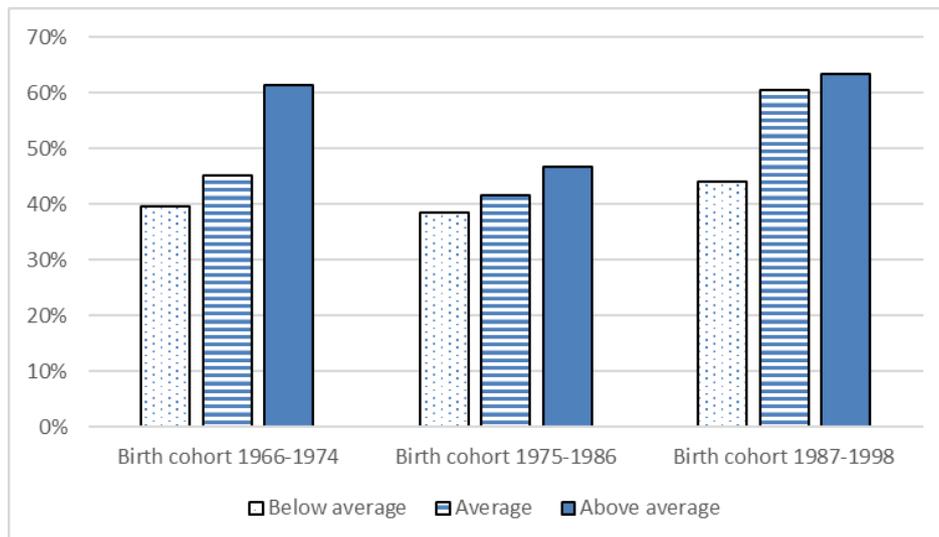
**Figure 5. School Mediation and Whether the First Job was First Preference**



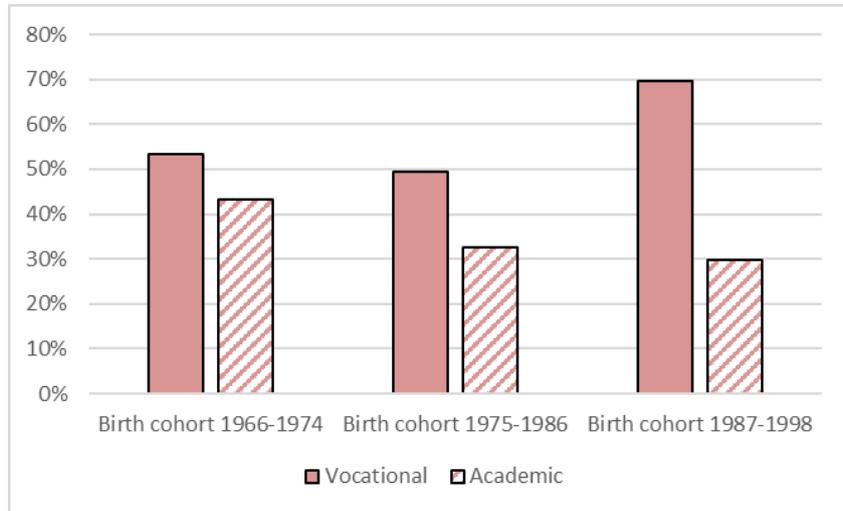
**Figure 6. School Mediation and Firm Size**



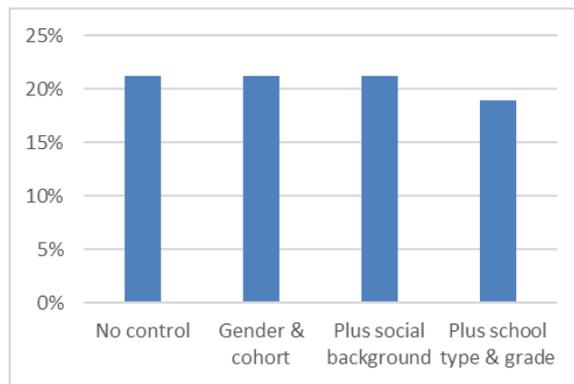
**Figure 7. School Mediation and Employment Status**



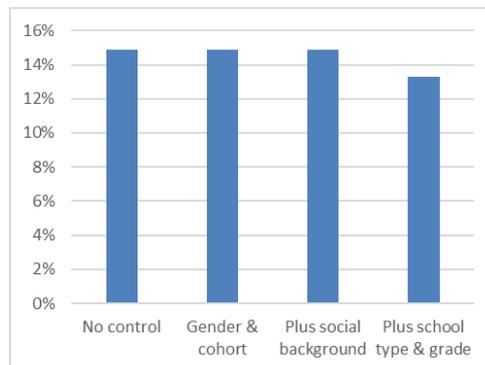
**Figure 8. School Mediation Rate and High School Grade by Birth Cohort**



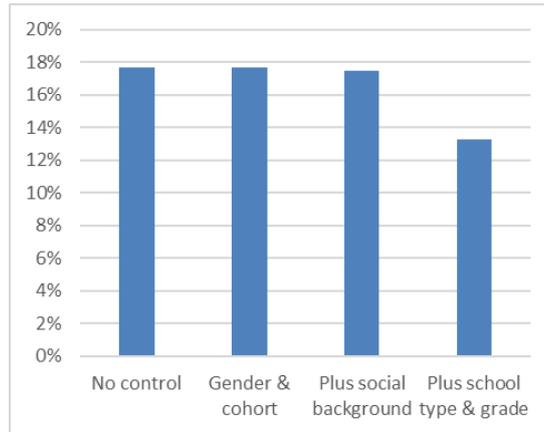
**Figure 9. School Mediation Rate and High School Types by Panel Sample**



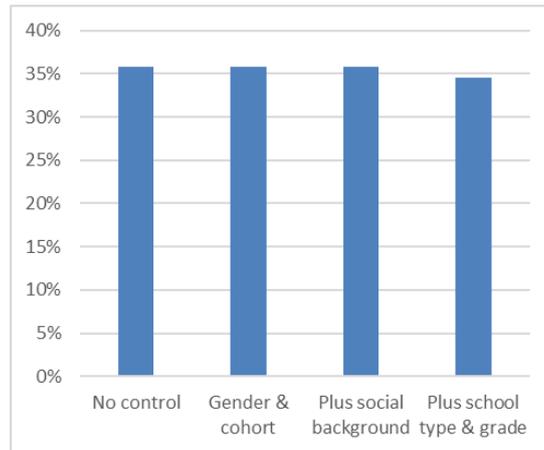
**Figure 10. Effect of School Mediation on the Timing of First Job after Various Controls**



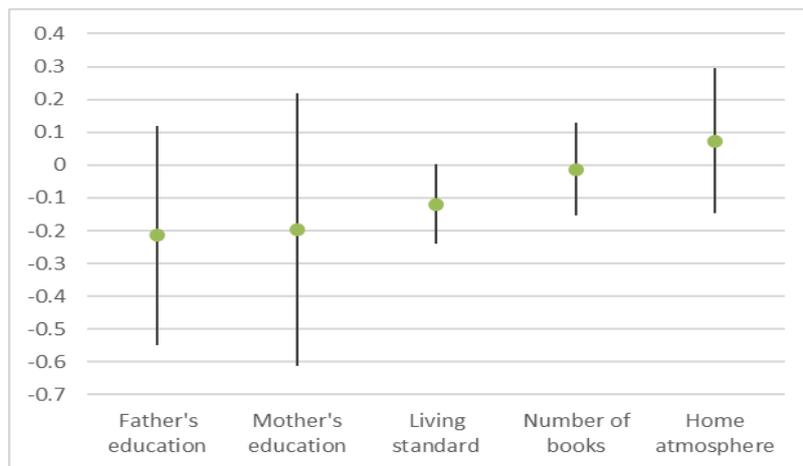
**Figure 11. Effect of School Mediation on First Job Preference after Various Controls**



**Figure 12. Effect of School Mediation on Firm Size after Various Controls**



**Figure 13. Effect of School Mediation on Employment Status after Various Controls**



**Figure 14. Social Background and the Use of School Mediation**