



The **Online Section Meeting “Education”** is part of the annual conference organized by the German Association for Social Science Research on Japan (VSJF). The 2025 conference, held at the University of Vienna, took place under the title “**(Un)Democratic Futures: Japan and Global Trajectories towards an (Un)Equal World.**” It brought together scholars from Japan and the German-speaking world to explore how current global crises are reshaping democracy, equality, and the conditions under which future (un)democratic practices might emerge.

Within this broader context, the Section Meeting *Education* offered an open forum for researchers, students, and anyone interested in Japanese education. This was the third consecutive year the meeting was held online, and the format continues to work remarkably well. It allows for a truly international and accessible exchange, especially for students and early-career researchers who may not have the budget to travel. While the time difference remains a minor challenge, the advantages in inclusivity and reach clearly outweigh it.

The aim of this meeting is to provide a space to discuss education in Japan—its social and political dimensions—and to foster meaningful dialogue across different backgrounds and career stages. As in previous years, we welcomed a diverse group of presenters and also some familiar faces.

Each presentation lasted about 20 minutes, followed by a vibrant 10-minute Q&A session. Participants were encouraged to submit questions via the chat to help manage time effectively.

In the following report, you will find short summaries of each presentation and additional information about the speakers. If you have questions or wish to contact one of the presenters, please feel free to reach out at education@vsjf.net or Vincent.lesch@zo.uni-heidelberg.de

Organization:

Vincent B. LESCH is a research fellow at the Institute for Japanese Studies at Heidelberg University, focusing on consumer education and consumer protection as part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Japan’s education system and society. His work examines educational policies, legal frameworks, and the role of NPOs in implementing consumer education at the micro-level. For more information: <https://www.zo.uni-heidelberg.de/de/japanologie/institut/personen/lesch>



From Policy to Practice: Challenges in Implementing Environmental Education in Japan

Miwa TATSUNO, Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES)

Since the 1960s, Environmental Education (EE) and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in Japan have evolved from pollution control to integrating environmental, social, and economic dimensions (IGES, 2024). ESD is now embedded in national education policy, and Japan’s 2024 revision of its Basic Environmental Education Policy reaffirms its commitment to sustainability (MEXT, 2024). Despite progress, implementation remains uneven. This study examines the gap between policy and practice, identifying five main challenges: resource deficits that limit school- and municipal-level implementation; institutional rigidity rooted in hierarchical governance and lifetime employment; socioeconomic inequities reducing access to experiential learning; misalignment between sustainability competencies and evaluation systems; and fragmented trends such as “New Capitalism” and “Ethical Job Hunting” that lack policy integration.

To address these barriers, the paper proposes four strategies: strategic investment in educators and curricula; stronger policy integration linking education and labor markets; equity measures to support inclusive participation; and cross-sector collaboration among government, private, and civil society actors. Japan’s case underscores the need to overcome economic and institutional barriers to realize the transformative potential of EE and ESD. Reframing these not only as educational tools but as drivers of economic resilience and innovation could position Japan at the forefront of the global sustainability transition.

Thoughts after the section meeting:

“I was truly inspired by the perspectives shared by the other presenters. What struck me most was how Japan’s educational challenges were analyzed through lenses that differ from typical domestic discourse. As a Japanese participant, I realized there are cultural assumptions and embedded norms—such as hierarchy, conformity, and pathways to success—that I often take for granted. The presentations showed how these norms influence policy implementation, equity, migration pathways, and students’ emotional well-being. Approaches grounded in relational human rights, diversified mobility pathways, or rethinking



competition offered new ways of imagining solutions that go beyond Japan’s traditional frameworks. This experience reminded me of the value of external viewpoints in uncovering blind spots and expanding possibilities. I am grateful for the opportunity to reconsider Japan’s education system from fresh and thought-provoking angles.”

TATSUNO Miwa is a Program Coordinator at the Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES) and holds a Master’s degree in International Environmental Policy from the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey (US). Her work centers on circular economy and waste management projects across Asia, often in collaboration with UN agencies, with a strong focus on education and capacity building. She also researches Japanese educational policy and the implementation of Education for Sustainable Development, including joint work with Japan’s Ministry of the Environment.

Recent publications:

Tatsuno, Miwa et al. (2024): *Marching with the Next Generation towards a Plastic Waste-Free Future in Sri Lanka – Student Activity Book / Teacher Resource Book.*

Student Activity Book <https://www.iges.or.jp/en/pub/marching-next-generation-towards-plastic-waste-free-future-sri-lanka-student-activity-book/en>

Teacher Resource Book <https://www.iges.or.jp/en/pub/marching-next-generation-towards-plastic-waste-free-future-sri-lanka-teacher-resource-book/en>

Tatsuno, Miwa et al. (2024): *Bridging the Gap: Financial and Structural Barriers to Effective Environmental Education in Japan.* <https://www.iges.or.jp/en/pub/bridging-gap-financial-and-structural-barriers-effective-environmental-education-japan>

Rethinking Human Rights Education in Japan: Interdependence, Democracy, and (Un)Equal Futures

JD PARKER, University of Hawai’i at Mānoa and Kyoto University

Across the globe, democracy and equality face growing pressures from economic inequality, resurgent nationalism, and planetary crises. Human rights education (HRE) is often seen as a means to sustain democracy but typically rests on liberal ideals of individual autonomy (Takeda, 2012; Meyer, 2020). While this has advanced protections for marginalized groups, it neglects the social and ecological interdependence crucial for addressing current global challenges (Komatsu et al., 2019).

Japan offers a distinct perspective. Since the early 2000s, it has formally integrated HRE into its national curriculum (Hirano, 2020). Rooted in cultural notions of relational selfhood, Japanese approaches contrast with Western individualism (Kasulis, 2002; Takayama, 2020). Ethnographic research in an Osaka municipal school shows how the *Ikiru kyōiku* (“Education



for Living”) program teaches human rights as practices of interdependence—fostering *omoiyari* (empathy), *sōdan* (dialogue), and *tsunagari* (connections) that support mutual care (Parker, 2025). This case illustrates how localized pedagogies can reshape democracy and equality globally. It emphasizes education’s role in cultivating relational capacities, highlights Japan’s philosophical traditions as resources for rethinking political theory, and shows how collective orientations may be vital for responding to planetary crises. Japan’s approach thus invites a reimagining of democracy grounded in interdependence and community well-being.

Thoughts after the section meeting:

“This section meeting offered a rare and invaluable opportunity to engage with scholars whose work I have long read and admired, while also situating my own research alongside a community of early-career researchers working on Japanese education. For those of us studying education in Japan, the field is remarkably small, and worthwhile opportunities for sincere dialogue are limited. I often find myself caught between Japanese studies conferences, where education is marginal, and education conferences, where Japan itself requires extensive supplemental explanation. In that sense, this section meeting provided something really special. I found a space where shared commitments, deep knowledge and experience in Japan, and thoughtful questions could be asked without translation or justification. The quality of the discussions, the generosity of feedback, and the sense of intellectual community made this an especially impactful experience. I am deeply grateful for the funding and leadership that made this gathering possible, and I look forward to continuing to participate in and contribute to this community in the future, ideally in person.”

James “JD” PARKER is a PhD candidate in Educational Foundations at the University of Hawai’i at Mānoa and a Crown Prince Akihito Scholarship Foundation scholar currently based at Kyoto University—so for today’s section meeting, he represents two countries at once. His research investigates how different ontologies of the self shape Human Rights Education in Japan, contrasting individual with relational approaches. His fieldwork includes school-based HRE such as the “Education for Living” program in Osaka, the implementation of *tankyū* (inquiry-based learning), and virtual exchange initiatives for undocumented students as a decolonial form of global citizenship education. His current projects include work on interdependence in HRE as well as organizing the “Policy and Practice in Japan’s Education” symposium at Kyoto University.



From Language Students to Specified Skilled Workers: Specified Skilled Study Abroad scheme and implications

Anh Phuong LE, Waseda University

This chapter explores the collaborative efforts between overseas sending agencies and language schools in Japan to facilitate a seamless transition for international students from language learning to employment under Japan’s Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) visa program, known as Specified Skilled Study Abroad. The new scheme aims to prepare students for integration into Japan’s labor market by promising a clear and short pathway from language education to skilled labor. Through interviews with staff from sending agencies from Vietnam—one of the biggest sending countries of language students and manual skilled workers to Japan and students who are engaging in this scheme, this study investigates the mechanisms and strategies employed to align language training with the demands of the SSW framework. By analyzing the roles of these agencies and Japanese language schools, the research examines how they collaborate to shape the migratory experiences of international students. This chapter also outlines the evolving education-migration policies, which indicates the Japanese government’s effort in widening the pathway to labor market for international students.

Thoughts after the section meeting:

“I was very happy to be back for the second time at the Education section meeting. I was happy to see many familiar faces in the room with me, compared to the previous year. As a PhD student navigating academia, it is so meaningful to have this experience as evidence how I am growing and how my network is growing with me. My presentation last year at the section turned into a publication, so I really hope that my presentation this year can have a shared result!!”

Anh Phuong LE is a PhD student in International Studies at Waseda University’s Graduate School of Asia-Pacific Studies and a student member of the Waseda Institute of Asian Migrations. Her research examines the mobility of Vietnamese students and specified skilled workers in Japan, with a focus on their social and economic practices. In 2023, she co-founded the Asian Migration Studies Network, a community for students and early-career scholars working on Asian migration. Her recent open-access publication, *“From Vocational Schools to Universities: Navigating Educational Permeability for Vietnamese Students in Japan,”* analyzes how students in Japanese vocational schools pursue upward educational mobility despite structural constraints.



Educational Competition and Status Attainment in Japan Revisited: From School to Work to Happiness?

Steve R. ENTRICH, University of Zurich

Since the 1980s, Japan has undergone dramatic demographic, economic and social change, which has had a lasting impact on young people in particular. The lost decade following the burst of the bubble-economy in the early 1990s was accompanied by rising youth unemployment, an erosion of job security and widening inequalities. Japan became soon known as *kakusa shakai* or “gap society”. Young people born in the 1980s and 1990s, who have never experienced the booming Japanese economy, started questioning the traditional path towards “happiness”: It seemed as if the arduous path to one of the high ranked universities did no longer guarantee men well-paid, secure jobs in major companies, whereas significant labor market barriers and gendered family expectations continue to restrict women’s opportunities to pursue men-equivalent careers despite having high educational credentials.

In this talk, I will discuss how and why the sweeping educational reforms that were intended to reduce competition and inequality between students may have not had the anticipated results. Worse still, related problems of bullying (*ijime*), delinquency, truancy, and student suicide resulting from the rigid, uniform school system, its multiple rules and the highly competitive exam culture (and the resulting “exam hell”), as well as the high use of private supplementary lessons (at *juku/yobikō*) have by no means disappeared.

Drawing on recent national panel data for youth in Japan, this paper theoretically and empirically examines the question: What are the challenges youth face on their way to (un)happiness in present Japan? Results are discussed with regards to social inequalities focusing in particular on the ongoing role of private supplementary tutoring for educational competition and inequality formation for the first time also looking into effects of these pathways for life satisfaction in early adult life.

Thoughts after the section meeting:

“Attending the annual meeting of the VSJF Education Section is always a highlight—an opportunity to reconnect with familiar faces, meet new colleagues, and engage with early- and late-career researchers from the German-speaking world, Japan, and beyond. This year’s



session was no exception. The first two speakers, Miwa TATSUNO and JD PARKER, both offered fascinating and advanced insights into environmental and human rights education. Their contributions set a high bar for the session. This was followed by presentations from myself and two early-career researchers whose doctoral projects closely intersect with my own work on transnational mobility and labour migration.

*Naho YOSHIKAWA, a PhD candidate in University of Zurich in my SNSF project JTEPS: Japan Transnational Education and Career Panel Study (<https://www.jteps.uzh.ch/en.html>), presented her dissertation project to an international audience for the first time—an important milestone and a proud moment for our team. Anh Phuong LE (PhD student at Waseda University) presented work that will contribute to an upcoming edited volume I am co-editing with Matthias HENNINGS (Kwansei Gakuin), who also attended the session. The volume, *Internationalisation of Education in Japan – Policies, Practices, and Impact*, will be published with Routledge in summer 2026.*

Although I chose to present on a different topic this year (youth in Japan), I benefited greatly from the feedback and stimulating discussion. Many thanks to all friends and colleagues who participated—your engagement is what makes this community so enjoyable. I look forward to seeing you again next year. Even if the VSJF annual conference does not take place as planned, the Education Section meeting will, as always, continue to be a reliable and inspiring constant.”

Dr. Steve R. ENTRICH holds a PhD in educational sociology and is co-head of the SNSF project JTEPS (“The Japan Transnational Education and Career Panel Study”) at the University of Zurich. He earned a Magister in history and education (2010) and a PhD with honors on “Shadow Education and Social Inequalities in Japan” (2016) from the University of Potsdam. Since 2010, he has conducted research and taught in comparative sociology, education, and Japanese studies at universities in Germany, Switzerland, Austria, and abroad, including Dōshisha University, DIJ Tokyo, University of Tokyo, Pennsylvania State University, and the Education University of Hong Kong. His research focuses on social inequalities in education, educational decision-making, returns to education, life course research, and transnational and supplementary education. Selected publications include *Youth in Times of Crisis* (2025), *Shadow Education and Social Inequalities in Japan* (2018), and articles in *Japanese Journal of Sociology*, *Higher Education*, and *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*.

Recent publications:

Gniewosz, Gabriele, Steve R. Entrich & Alfred Berger [eds.] (2024): *Youth in Times of Crisis: Societal and Individual Challenges in Becoming an Adult Today*. SpringerVS (Special issue of *Zeitschrift für Bildungsforschung*). <https://link.springer.com/collections/ibaejdiede>

Entrich, Steve R. (2018): ***Shadow Education and Social Inequalities in Japan: Evolving Patterns and Conceptual Implications***. Heidelberg/Cham: Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-69119-0>



Social-emotional competencies and social support in access to study abroad: From Japanese adolescents’ perspectives

Naho YOSHIKAWA, University of Zurich

Once viewed as a broadly middle-class meritocracy, Japan has become a ‘gap society’ where learning capital and multidimensional competencies determine social mobility. Kariya’s concept of learning capital emphasizes the rising importance of “individuality,” including aptitude, personality, and extracurricular engagement (Chiavacci & Hommerich, 2017; Kariya, 2009). The shift from exam-based selection (senbetsu) to multidimensional admissions (sentaku) reflects broader educational and labor changes, as lifelong employment declines and individuals must accumulate their own competencies. Shadow education has diversified beyond academics into extracurricular and overseas programs, aligning with government initiatives like Tobitate! (2014) promoting “global human resources” (Yamada & Yamada, 2014). Despite these policies, study-abroad participation has fallen since 2004 (Yokota, Ota, & Niimi, 2018).

Empirical studies show that study abroad enhances language, intercultural, and non-cognitive skills valued by employers (Harder et al., 2015). Yokota et al. (2018) found higher incomes and greater personal development among former participants, linking these outcomes to Japan’s concept of “basic social skills” (METI). However, few studies examine how adolescents mobilize learning capital amid socioeconomic constraints or how social-emotional competencies shape access to study abroad. This qualitative study, part of the Japan Transnational Education and Career Panel Study (JTEPS), addresses this gap through interviews with 30 adolescents, analyzing how social support and non-cognitive traits interact to enable participation in study-abroad programs.

Thoughts after the section meeting:

“My deep gratitude for the opportunity to present at the Education Section meeting at VDJF 2025. The presentations addressed a wide range of topics, with interesting interconnections in their implications. Those inputs helped me significantly to reflect on my research focus in a broader context. I also received constructive insights, along with many takeaways that will help guide my research forward. This occasion to connect with fellow colleagues working on



education in Japan allowed me to learn from a wider audience’s feedback beyond my usual academic circle.”

YOSHIKAWA Naho is a doctoral researcher at the University of Zurich’s Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies and holds an M.A. in Public Policy from International Christian University in Japan. Before starting her PhD, she worked at the Japan External Trade Organization as a researcher on social, political, and economic developments in Africa, and interned at the OECD Directorate for Education and Skills, contributing to the Study on Social and Emotional Skills. Her doctoral research examines the role of non-cognitive skills in young people’s transition from education to work, reflecting her long-standing interest in education policy and social-emotional competencies.