

Social class and Japanese mothers' support of young children's education: A qualitative study

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Abstract

The impact of social class backgrounds on young children's educational experiences has attracted increasing attention in early childhood research. However, few longitudinal studies related to social class and parental involvement in young children's education are available, especially in East Asian contexts. In this longitudinal qualitative study, I examined middle-class and working-class mothers' beliefs related to education and processes through which they support their children's education from preschool to second grade in Japan. Sixteen Japanese mothers were recruited from preschools and four in-depth interviews along with home visits were conducted over 3 years. Findings of this study demonstrated that both middle-class and working-class mothers hoped that their children would do well academically, but their beliefs related to parenting roles and development of the children's learning interest differed. Such distinctive maternal beliefs affected their ways of supporting their children's education in everyday contexts.

Keywords

elementary school, inequality, Japan, parent involvement, preschool, school readiness, socialization, socioeconomic status, stratification, transition

Introduction

The impact of families' social class backgrounds on young children's educational experiences has attracted increasing attention in the field of early childhood education. Regardless of the nation's educational contexts, parents from middle-class to upper middle-class backgrounds are likely to provide more academic support for their young children than parents from lower social class backgrounds (Bourdieu, 1973; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Buchmann, 2002; Byun et al., 2012; Gao, 2012; Lareau, 2000; Yamamoto and Brinton, 2010). However, few longitudinal studies on parental involvement in children's education, which examined social class differences from preschool to early primary school, are available. Studies in the United States identified that resources and experiences brought by families affect children's preschool and early school experiences, and such early educational experiences can have critical influence on students' later academic trajectories

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(Alexander and Entwisle, 1988; Alexander et al., 2001). However, it is not clear whether a social class gap in children's educational experiences exists during preschool periods in a country with a relatively small economic gap and meritocratic educational system. It is also crucial to examine how families from different social class groups support their children's education from preschool to early school years, at this transition time, in non-Western contexts.

The present study examines how middle-class and working-class mothers support their young children's education from preschool through second grade in Japan. The Japanese case provides a unique insight into studies of early childhood studies. Despite Japan's emphasis on egalitarianism in its school system, a social class gap in students' academic achievement has been an unresolved issue (Hashimoto, 1999; LeTendre, 1996; Tominaga, 1969; Yamamoto and Brinton, 2010). Examination of whether patterns related to social class exist in children's early educational opportunities in a country long viewed as "all middle class" and with a centrally controlled educational system would provide an important insight into studies of education and child development. The goal of this study is to provide an in-depth look at similarities and differences in beliefs of middle-class and working-class mothers and the ways through which these mothers are involved in their young children's education in Japan.

Social class and families' academic support: literature review

Regardless of social conditions, young children's educational experiences are distinct depending on their families' social class backgrounds. Studies conducted in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the United States have demonstrated that middle-class parents tend to provide more academic support for their young children, such as cultural and music lessons, literacy and cognitive activities, and extracurricular academic classes, than working-class parents (Buchmann, 2002; Dumais, 2006; Gao, 2012; Jung et al., 2012; Lareau, 2000; Stevenson and Stigler, 1992; Yamamoto and Brinton, 2010). Furthermore, according to the evidence in the United States, socioeconomic differences in parental support appear even before children begin formal schooling (Dumais, 2006; Jung et al., 2012). Sociologists in many countries argue that parents' social class status is one of the most powerful elements affecting children's academic experiences (Bourdieu, 1973; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Kariya, 2012; Lareau, 2000, 2003). In addition to having extended resources to invest in their children's education, middle-class parents teach and support their children in a similar way as school teachers do compared with parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Heath, 1983; Lareau, 2000, 2003). Such connections between home and school in middle-class households help children learn at school (Heath, 1983; Lareau, 2003). Because parental support for children's education generally exerts positive influence in the child's academic aspirations and learning processes in both Western and Asian countries (Byun et al., 2012; Fan and Chen, 2001; Gao, 2012; Grolnick and Slowiaczek, 1994; Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1997), understanding why and how middle-class parents are more involved in their young children's education than working-class parents is essential.

Studies underscore the importance of family support at an early stage. Evidence from the United States demonstrates that the transition from preschool to formal schooling can be disruptive or smooth depending on family backgrounds due to varying prior experiences and resources provided to children (Alexander and Entwisle, 1988). Yet, little evidence demonstrates how families from different social class groups support their children's education from preschool to early elementary years. Studies of social class and young children's educational processes in East Asian countries, such as Japan, are particularly scarce despite growing attention to adolescents' educational experiences across varying social class groups in these countries (Gao, 2012; Sakai, 2010; Slater,

2010; Yoder, 2004). Salient characteristics in educational systems and cultural contexts in Japan, such as centralized administration, widespread private lessons, and high value on educational credentials, may uniquely affect middle-class and working-class parents' beliefs related to education and their ways of supporting young children's education. In the current study, I examined a case of Japan. Because mothers are considered to be the primary caretakers of their children in Japan (Allison, 1996; Hirao, 2001; Holloway, 2010; Holloway et al., 2005), this study focused on mothers' support of their young children's education.

Social class and young children's education in Japan

Japan had long been viewed as a homogeneous middle-class society, not only by Americans but also by Japanese (Cummings, 1980; Hara, 2000; Kariya, 2010). Over 90 percent of Japanese viewed themselves as middle class in 1995 (Hara, 2000). The income gap in Japan had been narrower than in many other industrialized countries, and the percentage of households living on welfare has been low (Dreier, 2007; White, 2002). However, prolonging recession over the past two decades has increased an economic gap and awareness of educational inequalities related to socioeconomic status within Japan (Brinton, 2010; Kariya, 2012; Sato, 2000; Tachibanaki, 2006).

In cross-cultural studies, Japanese education is often highlighted as a successful model of egalitarian education (Peak, 1991; Stevenson and Stigler, 1992).¹ The central government controls school curricula and standards, and teachers in primary schools employ similar instructional approaches under the same curricula (Cummings, 1980; Holloway and Yamamoto, 2003). Usually, students in public schools are not subjected to tracking or ability grouping through middle school (Shimizu and Tokuda, 1991; Stevenson and Stigler, 1992). However, studies have demonstrated a powerful influence of social class on students' academic achievement and attainment in Japan (Hashimoto, 1999; Kariya, 2012; LeTendre, 1996; Yamamoto and Brinton, 2010). Moreover, recent studies have demonstrated that social class discrepancies in students' academic motivation and performance appear by the time students reach fifth grade (Kariya, 2004, 2012). These findings suggest the importance of examining children's educational opportunities across varying social class groups at an early stage.

While increasing attention has been paid to social class and students' academic trajectories, social class has been an understudied area in early childhood education and family studies in Japan. Despite abundant ethnographic studies describing middle-class mothers' involvement in their children's education as if they were professional (Hirao, 2001; Vogel, 1978; White, 1996), studies on working-class families are limited. Previous findings based on statistical analyses revealed that less educated mothers were less involved in their preschoolers' educational processes, such as literacy activities, than more educated mothers in Japan (Yamamoto et al., 2006). Moreover, only 29 percent of mothers without college education aspired for 4-year university education for their children compared to 61 percent of college-educated mothers did within the country (Holloway et al., 2005). However, these quantitative studies did not illustrate how middle-class and working-class mothers supported their children's education in everyday context. Moreover, little is known about why less educated working-class parents are less engaged in their children's education and hold lower educational aspiration for their children from an early stage. As LeVine (1988) argued, parents' beliefs related to education and child development are likely to shape their parenting styles and educational support. Mothers in different social class groups may have different types of experiences and resources that influence their beliefs related to education and their ways of supporting their children's education. How do middle-class and working-class Japanese mothers construct

beliefs related to their children's education and development? How do such beliefs support or hinder mothers' involvement in their children's education?

In order to provide in-depth look at processes through which middle-class and working-class mothers support their children's education in relation to their beliefs in Japan, I utilized qualitative research method by analyzing in-depth interviews with 16 mothers conducted over 3 years. Qualitative research method was the best way for me to understand complex meanings related to education, maternal roles, and their actions perceived by mothers in their social class contexts. Listening to individual mother's experiences about their childhood, their own educational experiences, and their life as a mother was crucial in understanding how working-class and middle-class mothers developed class-related beliefs and actions. By analyzing longitudinal data, I was also able to examine continuity and discontinuity in mothers' beliefs about and attitudes toward education in relation to their socioeconomic contexts.

Research method

Participants

For the purpose of this qualitative research, I analyzed in-depth interviews conducted with 16 Japanese mothers in addition to field notes collected from 2000 and 2003. The 16 mothers were recruited from 116 participants in the original longitudinal research project on parenting.² In 2000, 116 mothers with a 5- or 6-year-old child were recruited through nine preschools in Hokkaido and Osaka, Japan. Among the nine preschools, five were located in middle-class and four were located in working-class neighborhoods. After conducting an interview and a survey with the 116 mothers, 16 mothers, all living in Osaka, were selected based on the initial parenting-efficacy scores (i.e. how competent they viewed themselves to be in raising and disciplining their children) and their educational levels to include mothers with a broad spectrum of parenting efficacy.

Among the 16 mothers, eight women were middle class and the other eight were working class (Table 1). Educational backgrounds of the eight working-class mothers were high school or middle school. All but two of the working-class mothers had husbands whose highest educational level was high school graduation. All of these working-class mothers lived in a working-class neighborhood with a high ratio of factory and labor workers (Fujita and Hill, 1997; Statistics Bureau, 2001). Most of them lived in a small and relatively old apartment (*apaato*) including public housing. Their husbands' occupations included manual labor work, nonskilled work such as construction, semi-skilled work (*shokunin*), sales, and small business employees. Ishida (1989) noted that firm size is an important indicator differentiating a worker's status in Japan. Half of the working-class husbands worked for a small business with less than 20 employees, while none of the middle-class husbands in this study did. Half of the eight working-class mothers had a part-time job, such as assembling pieces for parts of products at home (*naishoku*) or working as a cashier. One mother had a full-time job at a factory.

All middle-class mothers had either a bachelor degree or an associate degree and their husbands also had college degrees, except for two whose husbands received vocational education (*senmon gakkou*). These mothers lived in one of the following housing types: a newly constructed modern high-rise apartment (*manshon*), or a large house in an upper middle-class neighborhood or a middle-class neighborhood, except for two who lived in a working-class neighborhood. Their husbands were engaged in white-collar or professional work in the fields such as advertisement, computers, and medicine. Half of the husbands worked for a large firm which had more than 500 employees. Six of the eight mothers had a part-time job such as an instructor, sales person, or store cashier by the time their children attended second grade. One mother had a full-time professional job.

Table 1. Demographic information for middle-class and working-class mothers.

	Middle-class mothers (N = 8)	Working-class mothers (N = 8)
Mothers' education (n)	BA/BS degree (4) AA degree (<i>tandai</i>) (4)	High school (7) Middle school (1)
Mothers' age in years (n)	30–35 (4) 35–40 (2) Over 41 (1)	30–35 (6) Over 41 (2)
Number of children (n)	1 (1) 2 (5) 3 (2)	1 (1) 2 (4) 3 (3)
Birth order of target child (n)	1 (1st) 2 (2nd) 3 (3rd)	1 (1st) 2 (2nd) 3 (3rd)
Types of mother's work (year 1)	Teaching, music instructor, cashier, school assistant, sales	Cashier, sales, factory/packing, assembling pieces of parts (<i>naishoku</i>), family business
Husband's education (n)	BA/BS degree (6) Vocational school (2) (<i>senmon gakkou</i>)	BA/BS degree (2) High school (6)
Husband's occupation	Skilled, professional, managerial, sales, office work	Semiskilled (e.g. sushi chef), nonskilled, family business, sales, office work
Husband's firm size, that is, the number of employees (n)	More than 500 (4) 20–500 (4)	More than 500 (1) 20–500 (3) Less than 20 (4)

The mothers' ages varied from 30 to 45 years. The number of children varied from 1 to 3. All women were married during the 3 years they participated in this study. Six women had a single child. Seven target children were females and nine were males.

Data collection

The 16 mothers were interviewed four times from 2000 to 2002 when children attended preschool, first grade, and second grade. The first interview was conducted in a private room at a preschool, but the second to fourth interviews were conducted at the women's homes, except for one mother who preferred to be interviewed in a public space outside her home. Each interview ranged from 90 minutes to 3 hours. All of the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed in Japanese. For each interview, there were five or six orienting questions, but the content of each interview depended on themes and issues raised by the women themselves. Over the course of these interviews, the women commented on a wide range of issues pertaining to their role as a mother, their views of their children, their support for their children's schooling, their interactions with school personnel, as well as their own childhood and school experiences. There were also opportunities to have informal talks with some mothers over lunch or dinner and to observe some of the mothers' interactions with their children. For those occasions, field notes were written after the participant observations.

Qualitative analytic strategies

Various dimensions of qualitative analytic strategies were used in this research (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Before exploring themes related to maternal education or social class, I read interview transcripts prepared in Japanese and field notes thoroughly and repeatedly. Based on this, case summaries for each woman were made to describe their life histories and key themes. In order to examine the women's beliefs and actions related to their involvement in their children's education, I then focused on issues pertaining to parental involvement in children's education in each woman's interviews. I sorted narratives related to parental involvement categories using the qualitative data software of "NVivo," and focused on identifying emerging and repeated themes in women's narratives. I then listed these themes, tested the salience of the recurring patterns in relation to social class, and examined which theme is more common and explanatory than others. After identifying general themes related to social class, I made charts for these themes and explored each mother's narratives in relation to the themes. Based on these narratives, I reexamined middle-class and working-class mothers' narratives in order to find both similarities and differences. For presentations of this study, I tried to include narratives from many mothers. In order to protect the women's privacy, I used pseudonyms for all women and their children.

Findings

Middle-class mothers

I am not worried about my son's academic progress in elementary school ... I will help my son develop good homework habits, check his schedule as soon as he comes home, and help him prepare for tomorrow's schoolwork as soon as possible ... If I educate him to do these things when he is still young, he will acquire good learning habits. It's not easy, but I must do that for my child. It's a parent's responsibility. (Masayo, a middle-class mother with two children)

Cultivating interest in learning. As exemplified in Masayo's narrative, middle-class mothers in this study expressed their commitment to support their children's academic progress at the transition from preschool to elementary school. However, middle-class mothers' preparedness for their children's schooling did not begin suddenly at this transition period. During the time when their children attended preschools, middle-class mothers reported being engaged in various cognitive and learning activities which were incorporated into their children's daily lives. The degree and intensity varied depending on the mother, but these activities included reading letters on signboards on streets, playing word games, working on workbooks together, and reading books every day. Many mothers believed that such experiences could be a form of play and not experienced as formal study. They themselves showed enjoyment in sharing literacy and cognitive activities with their children. When their children did not show interest in learning letters or numbers, they tried to encourage them by introducing other learning activities or arranging private lessons for them. When they were 5 or 6 years old, middle-class children's lives tended to be filled with cognitively stimulating activities or extracurricular classes such as *kumon* (math or language classes), piano, and sports.

Middle-class mothers in this study strongly advocated the importance of early cultivation. They believed that children had inherent potential and individual talent but that this potential required nurturing. Furthermore, they believed that it was parents', or mothers', responsibilities to bring out these potentials and to cultivate motivation to learn. They shared the idea that parents "determine" or "influence" young children's educational trajectories, or even children's enjoyment in learning. As Mari strongly advocated the importance of early cultivation,

I know it is difficult, but I want to help my children be able to enjoy learning. Unless parents foster the idea that studying or learning is fun for children when they are young, they will not develop such attitudes.

Through attendance of private music and academic lessons, middle-class parents hoped to cultivate their young children's general interests in learning, routines, and habits to enhance children's everyday learning and good learning attitudes. Enrichment classes were seen as primary opportunities through which children could cultivate their good learning attitudes such as sitting still, developing concentration, or paying attention to teachers. The middle-class mothers tended to believe that cultivating learning interests at a young age would become the foundation for children's motivation to learn once they attend primary school.

Developing good learning habits for early schooling. Before their children entered primary school, six out of the eight middle-class mothers described various strategies to support their children's academics—from checking their homework every day, monitoring their academic progress, and tutoring school subjects, to seeking advice from professionals or teachers as well as providing emotional support. For the first 2 years at elementary school, middle-class mothers tended to focus on developing good learning habits. The mothers believed that a daily routine of doing homework and reviewing schoolwork was important in the development of necessary good study habits. As Masayo put it,

I tell my son to do homework every day. I make sure that he finishes homework before dinner time. I check his homework, and tell him to make corrections when I find mistakes. I think that it is necessary to check children's homework for the first two years of elementary school.

Middle-class mothers also monitored their children's educational progress closely and supplemented their learning by teaching or providing private lessons when their children seemed to have difficulties. For example, as soon as Miyuki found that her daughter received a poor test score, she decided to tutor her daughter at home in addition to sending her to an academic class:

I told her to study with me, and I made her practice [mathematics]. I didn't want her to think that what we were doing was study (*benkyou*). So I just wrote down math problems on a white paper, made her do them, and corrected them ... She was not particularly happy to work on these things, but she practiced anyway.

After this training, her daughter received a perfect score on a mathematics test. Overall, the mothers tended to notice children's problems early and intervened quickly. These mothers believed that checking their children's homework and ensuring correct answers was essential to their maternal role. The efficacy of parental involvement in their children's educational processes was salient in their narratives. They felt comfortable in their engagement in cognitive and literacy activities and believed that they had the ability to teach school subjects to their children, especially when their children were young. Their fundamental belief was that they were capable of helping their children, but they might have to work to find the right strategy. These mothers tended to exhibit perseverance, sometimes by seeking advice and guidance from teachers or professionals when confronted with difficult situations in relation to their children's schooling. They tended to be comfortable in talking with teachers and reading books written by professionals.

Having a teacher or a professional in the field of education in their social network helped them seek advice when needed. For example, when Mari's son expressed that he disliked studying one particular subject, she asked her friend, who was an educational researcher, for advice. He advised her to introduce a subject which was more appealing to her son, and recommended that she read a

book which contained advice regarding such issues. Mari also endeavored to educate herself to be a better parent by reading parenting books and attending lectures by educational professionals. She said, "If I had serious concerns about my children, I would consult with the right person, read books and collect information ... I would never ignore it."

Overall, middle-class mothers' support at home helped their children's transition from preschool to elementary school. Most mothers reported that their children had a smooth transition from preschool to elementary school. During the first 2 years in elementary school, none of the middle-class mothers reported any concerns about their children's academic progress. Many mothers reported that school subjects were easy for their children because they were "like a review (*fukushuu*)," and their children received good test scores and evaluations from teachers. Some also reported that such positive reinforcement created confidence and a sense of enjoyment surrounding studying in their children.

Monitoring school instructions, supplementing at home. Many middle-class mothers were happy with their choice of preschool. Middle-class mothers frequently contacted preschool teachers to ask "small things" about their children's school life. Mothers reported that preschools were open to parents and welcomed their visits. Unlike preschools, mothers could not choose an elementary school for their children, since children were automatically assigned to a district public school. All middle-class children in this study attended a public school for the first 2 years. Middle-class mothers were critical toward elementary school teachers. Six out of the eight middle-class mothers shared similar criticisms toward elementary school teachers, such as lacking motivation in teaching or not educating their children enough. Overall, middle-class mothers viewed elementary schools as a place for children to "have fun with friends, learn social skills, and go through some textbooks," rather than advancing their academic skills.

While being aware of individual differences across teachers, middle-class mothers tended to share the belief that teachers could not watch or take care of all children in a large class, usually consisting of 25 to 40 students. As a result, they emphasized parents' role in monitoring children's academics and supplementing education. As Beni put it, "Parents have to do everything, including checking class schedules and lists of things to bring to school, studying with them, and checking their homework." However, despite their close monitoring of school teachers' practices and children's academic experiences at school, it was rare for the mothers to communicate or negotiate with teachers in order to improve their children's learning environment at school. Middle-class mothers tended to contact teachers and ask questions about their children or homework, but they felt uncomfortable confronting the school teacher when they recognized a problem. Four mothers specifically reported their concerns about negative effects on their children if they were to intervene. Because they were afraid that teachers would treat their children adversely, they limited their intervention while at the school site.

Instead, middle-class mothers tended to focus on solving academic problems at home. They supplemented their children's education by sending them to private after-school classes or by teaching them at home. When they were concerned about children's teachers or academic progress, they used outside networks such as *juku* teachers or teacher friends to seek opinions and advice. *Juku*, a private after-school class, was perceived to be not only the place to advance their children's academic skills but also served as an important source for advice and consult related to academics for middle-class mothers. Mothers valued opinions and advice from these professionals and used them to resolve school problems. Reiko's comments demonstrated her trust in her son's *juku* teacher:

For issues related to academics (*benkyou*), I consult with his *juku* teacher. If my son isn't motivated to study or if he is not making a good progress, I ask her ... She is very helpful. She is always available to consult with (*soudan*) if I have concerns.

Overall, middle-class mothers tended to be skeptical about the ability of elementary teachers at public schools to advance their children's education. Their perspectives differed depending on their actual experiences with individual teachers of their children. Nevertheless, these mothers felt little control over the school environment, and therefore invested their efforts outside of school, at home or by using *juku*.

Working-class mothers

I don't know if my son can catch up with other children at elementary school. Kenji is small and was born later in the school year. Other children are much more advanced in their academics (*benkyou*). Their mothers know a lot of things, so the children have so much knowledge. I am worried that Kenji might not be academically prepared at elementary school if he starts school like this. (Sakura, a working-class mother with three children)

Children's interests are naturally developed. Comments by Sakura, a working-class mother, illustrate that not all Japanese mothers have the knowledge and skills, or even confidence, to provide support for their children's schooling as previous studies on Japanese middle-class mothers have found. A few months before her son's transition from preschool to elementary school, Sakura expressed concerns about her son's academics at elementary school. Sakura viewed herself as lacking competence in educating her children compared to more educated middle-class mothers. She also could not come up with any coherent idea about how to facilitate her son's academics. Anxiety related to their children's academic progress appeared quite commonly in working-class mothers at the transition from preschool to elementary school, as five out of eight working-class mothers reported such concerns.

Before their children begin formal schooling, working-class mothers preferred to separate the domains of academics and play in children's everyday lives. During the child's preschool period, only one working-class mother read a book to her child daily, and five did not read at all. Limited education and dislike of literacy activities discouraged some of the mothers' reading practices with their children. They also did not convey the notion that parental reading would facilitate young children's literacy experiences.

Like middle-class mothers, working-class mothers also believed that it was very important to support children's interests in learning. However, a belief that parents could cultivate children's interests in learning by providing cognitive activities did not appear in working-class mothers' narratives. Fundamental beliefs shared among working-class mothers were that children's interest in learning develops naturally when the time comes and it varies depending on individual children. Even though Sakura, the mother cited above, was concerned about her son's academics at elementary school, she did not try to teach letters to her son before her son began schooling. Her comment illustrates the value she placed on her child's natural development: "Once children have interest in letters, they will learn quickly. So I haven't encouraged my son to learn the basic alphabets (*hiragana*) yet. I won't say anything until he shows interest."

Some of the working-class mothers also believed that adult intervention could potentially harm a child's motivation to learn, especially when women themselves had negative school experiences as a child. Mothers who did not enjoy studying as a child did not believe that they could cultivate

the enjoyment of learning in their young children. They believed that the optimal way to help their children enjoy studying was to avoid pressing their children to study when they are young. For instance, Junko, who developed negative feelings toward schooling as early as elementary school noted, "I myself didn't like to study that much, so I am thinking that my son would dislike [studying] if he becomes like me. So I have no intention to force him [to study]."

Most working-class mothers talked about the importance of supporting their children, especially at the time of transition to school. However, many mothers highlighted their roles as providers of physical care and emotional comfort rather than monitoring their children's academic progress or enhancing their children's academic performance. Ideas such as waking up their children, making sure that they go to school on time, and making them eat breakfast in addition to keeping eyes on their social relations appeared in many of their narratives.

Low confidence in the area of education. Working-class mothers hoped that their young children would be academically proficient at school. They specifically talked about the importance of understanding basic subjects and enjoying study. Like middle-class mothers, they also hoped that their children would be motivated to study and would enjoy going to school. After their children started elementary school, half of the working-class mothers reported their effort to support their children's education, such as checking their children's homework or teaching letters and basic subjects. However, they also reported withdrawing or abandoning teaching when they encountered difficulties in instructing their children, such as their children's disinterest or not making progress in their learning. Risa, who did not enjoy studying at school as a child, was worried about her daughter's academic progress. She tried to teach her daughter, but described the process of discontinuing teaching because of negative emotional experiences, including feeling frustration and anger:

My daughter could not write basic letters at all ... I tried to teach her. But she couldn't write. So I was angry and scolded her, and she cried. And I gave up, thinking that she would learn by herself sometime.

Four working-class mothers expressed anxiety and stress related to the processes of teaching their children. They reported having trouble in controlling their anger when they perceived their children to be incompetent, resulting in them yelling, which served to further aggravate their children's distress. These four mothers described giving up teaching when they encountered difficulties in instructing their children and hoped that their children would eventually develop the motivation to learn and study the subjects. Unlike middle-class mothers, they rarely enacted routines to facilitate children's homework or studying, such as setting a time for their children to complete homework or limiting their children's playtime until their homework was finished. The mothers complained that their children procrastinated in doing their homework and did not know how to encourage them other than simply telling them to do it.

By the time their children attended second grade, half of the working-class mothers reported their children's negative academic experiences, such as disliking learning subjects or their children's academic progress falling behind. However, they did not know how to intervene effectively to improve their child's performance. In many cases, financial strain also limited the working-class mothers' decisions to invest in their children's education. Half of the working-class mothers listed their financial situations as reasons for limiting their children's private lessons or educational materials. However, lack of financial resources was apparently not the sole reason that inhibited working-class mothers' involvement in their children's education because some of the middle-class mothers with limited economic resources were able to extend their children's educational opportunities by visiting libraries or borrowing and copying educational materials.

From analyzing the mothers' narratives, I found that their assessment of their own academic ability discouraged their support of their children's education. Half of the working-class mothers reported their own experiences of disliking studying, not being able to understand academic content, or not catching up with their classmates academically. None of the working-class mothers in this study pursued a college education, and some mothers saw their lack of education as a lack of knowledge and ability to teach their children. As Kayoko noted, "I am not good at educating children (*kyouiku*). I am not smart. So I can't teach my children like other mothers ... My children have to study by themselves." For mothers with children beginning elementary school, their own educational experiences deeply influenced self-assessment of their abilities and the abilities of their children, which resulted in influencing their involvement in their children's education.

Respect for teachers. Some working-class mothers complained about a specific elementary teacher's personality and characteristics, but they did not criticize teachers particularly in the domain related to academics. Half of the working-class mothers specifically noted that teachers were professionals or "worthy of respect (*erai*)" in relation to their own ability. They viewed teachers as educated and intellectual, unlike themselves. Working-class mothers rarely monitored teachers' instructional methods or made judgments about the content of homework. Five of the working-class mothers reported that they must rely on teachers for their child's academic direction. Thus, these mothers assigned the responsibility of educating their children solely to school teachers. Hiromi's comments illustrate her dependence on teachers for her son's education:

I am trying not to say anything bad about teachers. Whoever the teacher is, I will trust and leave the task (*makaseru*) to the teacher ... I solely rely on teachers. So even if teachers make a mistake, that's fine. I have been telling my children whatever teachers say is the right thing.

When her son entered the second grade, Hiromi was disappointed that her son's classroom teacher talked about personality differences between him and his sister and not his performance at school during a home visit. However, she did not ask the teacher about her son's school performance. One day, she visited during an open classroom session for parents and had the impression that students did not enjoy the teacher's instruction because her way of teaching lacked enthusiasm. Hiromi left the classroom during the middle of the instruction. Even though she related her disappointment, she nonetheless attempted to convince herself to respect the teacher.

In contrast to middle-class mothers, the majority of the working-class mothers rarely monitored and evaluated the quality of teachers' instruction, amount of homework, and its effect on children's learning experiences. As a result, the quality of teachers seemed to influence academic experience for working-class children more than it did for middle-class children. Supplementing education by teaching at home or sending children to *juku*, extracurricular private schools, was not a common practice among these families. They rarely sought advice from teachers or other professionals when their children seemed to be falling behind academically. Thus, communications between a mother and a teacher were largely determined by the individual teacher's effort and communications. Daily newsletters were especially helpful for the working-class mothers to learn about their children's school life and the upcoming homework schedule, because they tended not to ask questions or contact teachers. The quality of teachers and amount of homework also determined the overall academic experiences of working-class children, since they rarely received supplemental education outside of school. Some working-class mothers expressed a sense of loss when their child's teacher did not assign much homework. Kayoko's comment portrayed such a feeling:

It is tiring to have my child at home every Saturday. Teachers don't give homework on weekends, so I don't know what to do with my child. She just plays all day. She watches cartoon videos. Since she doesn't have homework, I really don't know what to do with her.

Discussion

All of the mothers in this study deeply desired that their children would be motivated to study, would enjoy going to school, and would perform well academically. The transition from preschool to elementary was not merely one of the several school transitions for the mothers and children: It was the beginning of formal schooling. Mothers in this study realized that young children needed parents' support during this time. However, when it came to the processes of supporting their children's schooling, patterns associated with social class ran deeply through the fabric of their attitudes.

Middle-class mothers in this study tended to provide continuous support and enriched their children's educational environments from an early stage. They felt comfortable about teaching and engaging their children with cognitive and literacy activities, and believed that these activities would benefit their children's schooling. Many working-class mothers also tried to support and teach their young children. However, without professionals to consult with and without confidence in their ability to teach their children, they tended to abort teaching especially when their children were not motivated to study. Middle-class mothers tended to be attuned to how children learned at school and created connections between home and school lives. Some of these processes overlap with patterns found for parents with elementary students in the United States (Heath, 1983; Lareau, 2000). This study further shows that different academic socialization processes between middle-class and working-class children appear at an early stage even in a country with a relatively smaller income gap and national educational system.

Mothers' perceptions about their parental roles also differed across the two social class groups. Middle-class mothers believed that it was necessary to cultivate their children's human capital at an early age, and eliciting their children's educational interests and assisting with their schooling were important in their role as parents. As LeTendre (1996) argued that any form of parents' investment in human capital may be advantageous in Japan where one score in one's exam scores determines students' acceptance at competitive high schools or colleges, middle-class Japanese mothers may view cultural and cognitive activities as a form of early investment in their children's future academic career. Working-class mothers perceived that their children's interests would naturally develop and adult intervention might negatively impact young children's motivation in learning and development of learning interests. These maternal views are, to some extent, similar to the social class pattern identified in the United States (Lareau, 2000, 2003). Ethnographic studies on Japanese working-class families also illustrated emphasis on the teacher's responsibility in educating children among these families (Kondo, 1990; Roberts, 1994; Shimizu and Tokuda, 1991). This study further demonstrated that such a tendency among working-class mothers exists even as early as preschool. Furthermore, such views deeply affected mothers' ways of supporting their children's education in everyday contexts. These findings suggest that parental skills and behaviors are not automatically provided by belonging to a certain social class. Mothers' own school experiences, their perceptions about their skills, and available resources all affected their decisions about and ways of supporting their children's education.

Educational strategies utilized by middle-class mothers in this study must be understood in relation to larger structural and cultural contexts of Japanese schools. Studies conducted in the United States generally demonstrate the role of parental involvement at the school site in young children's

academic experiences (Epstein and Sanders, 2002; Lareau, 2000). Parental involvement at school could improve classroom environments or increase teachers' expectations of their children, which increase teacher attentions and influence teachers' instruction styles (Yamamoto and Holloway, 2010). However, I found that intervention at preschool and elementary school was not a common strategy among the mothers in this study. Middle-class mothers initiated contact with teachers more often than working-class mothers, but most of the middle-class mothers endeavored to advance their children's education outside of school by utilizing private lessons and teaching at home. School curricula are controlled by the government, and there are no distinct academic tracks or divisions in Japanese primary schools. Thus, the mothers seemed to view themselves as having little control over their ability to alter their children's academic environment at school.

This 3-year longitudinal study also suggested that middle-class children were academically more prepared to start primary school than working-class children. Middle-class mothers' involvement in their young children's education tended to bring connections between school life and their home experiences, and such connections made children's transition from preschool to elementary school easier, especially in the academic domain. As Brinton (1993) emphasized in analyzing the value of early parental investment in determining children's academic tracks in the Japanese educational system, maternal involvement in preschool children's education helped their children's smooth transition to school.

Conclusion

Before concluding, limitations of this study should be noted. Due to the focus on in-depth analysis of maternal beliefs and attitudes, the number of participants I examined was small. Due to small sample size, I was not able to conduct a systematic exploration of how other factors such as children's birth order may mediate middle-class and working-class mothers' involvement in their children's education. More thorough study using a larger population is needed to examine how elements related to family structure facilitate or hinder parental involvement in children's education among middle-class and working-class mothers. Because I examined middle-class and working-class families, I did not include upper-class families or families in poverty in this study. The participants of this study also did not include families engaged in agricultural work or minority families. Thus, findings of this study, which were derived from 16 mothers in Osaka, may not be generalizable to patterns related to social class groups in other parts of Japan.

Despite these limitations, this study illustrates complex experiences and views of middle-class and working-class mothers in support of their young children's education in Japan. A social class gap in children's educational achievement has been an issue in both industrialized and less-developed nations (Baker et al., 2002; Chudgar and Luschei, 2010). Findings of this study point out the need for more studies on children's learning experiences depending on social class groups at an early stage. Longitudinal studies which examine young children's academic experiences from preschool to the first entry to school are of particular importance. While children in most countries experience the transition to formal schooling, such an experience can be different depending on their social class backgrounds due to different degrees of resources and home experiences associated with class.

Even in Japan, which has been highlighted as a model of egalitarian education (Cummings, 1980; Stevenson and Stigler, 1992), I identified many disadvantages among working-class children relative to middle-class children from an early stage. As I described in the 'Findings' section, half of the working-class mothers in this study reported negative academic experiences of their children, either disliking studying or not catching up with their peers academically by the second

grade, while none of the middle-class mothers did. It is possible that a social class gap in children's educational experiences through home environments begins at a very early stage regardless of the nation's educational system or economic condition. More studies which examine family processes for young children's educational experiences depending on social class, especially during or before preschool period, would help us understand the early mechanisms of educational inequalities associated with social class.

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Notes

1. Even though preschool education is not mandatory in Japan, 95 percent of children attend some form of preprimary institution at least for 1 year (Holloway and Yamamoto, 2003). Then children start elementary school in first grade when they are 6 years old. The Japanese educational system consists of 6 years of compulsory elementary school, 3 years of middle school and 3 years of noncompulsory general and vocational high schools, followed by the higher education options of junior college and 4-year university (Rohlen, 1983).
2. Data for this study was derived from "Parenting self-efficacy among Japanese mothers" project conducted at University of California, Berkeley (PI: Susan Holloway). I was a core member of this research project and was involved in almost all aspects of the research including designing surveys and interview questions, visiting preschools and contacting parents, and collecting data and conducting fieldwork and interviews.

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