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Title: 'School' in Japanese children's lives as depicted in *manga*

Dr Mio Bryce

Introduction
The effect of information and media technologies as well as the processes of commercialisation in increasing the porousness of the borders within and between today's societies warrants examining how the positioning and role as well as the representation of 'school' as a social world in children's lives has changed significantly. Traditionally, the role of the 'school' was to educate children with morals, discipline and knowledge, in order to mould them into an appropriate member of the society. Today, with the advancement of information technology, vast levels of knowledge can be easily accessed from numerous sources and without the reliance on the 'school' or the authority of teachers. Morals, disciplinary roles and religious values have become increasingly challenged, losing their absolute significance. Aggressive commercialisation inundates the home and school. Teachers are no longer on a pedestal. Everything, including the respect for teachers has come to be seen in 'relative' terms. In such a situation, what do children seek, and find, in 'school'?

Japanese youths experience school life as a complex environment, involving oppressive yet ambiguous social, psychological and parental pressures. Popular cultural representations of these experiences, such as in *manga* (printed/animated), one of the most popular forms of Japanese visual culture, provide us with an important sociological window onto Japanese children's social life. 'School' is an increasingly popular and significant location for numerous *manga*, particularly since the early 1970s. Yet its commercial success has ironically paralleled the disappearance of children's free time and space, including their childhood.

This paper will first outline the significance of *manga* and the key issues of the Japanese post-war education system, then examine the images of 'school' as depicted in *manga* to gain insights into the role and value of 'school' in Japanese children's lives, particularly focusing on two popular *manga*, *Doraemon* by Fujiko F, Fujio and *Azumanga daiō* by Azuma Kiyohiko.

With regard to references to Japanese names, the surname precedes the personal name.

Significance of *Manga*
As an object for scholarly study, *Manga* is one of the most effective vehicles for understanding the youth cultures of urban Japan as well as for providing insights into contemporary Japanese society as a whole. Most *manga* are story-driven and deal with "nearly every imaginable subject" (Schodt, 1996:27). In earlier periods of its history,

Manga was considered a playful form of entertainment merely for children, a perception that to some extent reflected the proliferating growth of manga as a demographically oriented medium. Yet this characterisation ignores how *manga* have contributed to forms of social questioning by engaging with serious issues, such as school bullying, drug/domestic/sexual abuse, suicide, teen pregnancy, single motherhood and homosexuality.

Unlike traditional comics in Western societies, *manga* (and manga-style presentations) are a major visual medium of communication, sharing one third of the total publications in Japan, including school textbooks and governmental publications. There is a wide range of *manga* magazines to accommodate the diverse interests and age range of readers from infants to middle age men and women. It has also evolved with and is linked to other communication and entertainment media, such as video and computer games, Internet and mobile phones (Murakami 1999), although it is only recently that *manga*, particularly *anime* (animated *manga*), has gained real popularity abroad. *Manga* has grown both in quantity and quality, and has been recognised as a powerful communicative medium. As Susan Napier (2001a) notes, *manga* and *anime* in particular, have begun to offer powerful, possibly 'post ethnic', spheres of fantasies to global audiences.

Manga can involve readers/audiences in its creation and social life as a cultural product. This is exemplified by the fact that the dominant weekly journal *Shūkan Shōnen Jump* (Weekly Boys' Jump)[1] has a firm editorial policy to respond readers' needs. That is, all artists and writers should include at least one of three keywords, 'friendship', 'effort' and 'win/success', chosen by 10-11 year old boys, and a serialised story may be terminated in its 10th week, if it fails to maintain its popularity with readers' gauged from weekly questionaries.

Considering the intense normative pressure on individuals in Japan for social conformity, *manga* is more than a cheap form of escapism -- it plays a significant psychological role in providing an imaginary space to shield people's injured and suppressed individuality. *Manga* is therefore situated as a pivotal point for interdisciplinary and cross-cultural research into contemporary Japan and post-modern society in general.

Although *manga* has its origin in the ancient period (e.g., caricatures in the Hōryūji temple, possibly as early as the late 7th century), it was its mass printing in the Edo period (1602-1868) that made it popular as a cheap, easily accessible, private form of entertainment. The style of today's *manga* has been influenced by Western cartoons' use of speech 'bubbles' to 'capture' or represent spoken words or thoughts since the end of the 19th century. *Manga* became a popular entertainment media for Japanese children, particularly boys, before the Second World War, although it was during the post-war period that it flourished to a level and volume of production that granted the medium institutionalised legitimacy as a significant artistic expression. This legitimacy was achieved largely through the pioneering work of the gifted and ambitious manga creator, Tezuka Osamu (1928-1989), who is respectfully referred to as the 'god of *manga*'. His contribution was enormous and

influential and his invention of the visual elements of 'story *manga*' (graphic novel) was particularly important. The genre of story *manga* provides limitless fictional arenas for *manga* artists to explore basically any topic, similar to written novels. Story m*anga* became the mainstream genre of *manga*, in both printed and animated versions.

Social study of *manga* in Western academia was pioneered by Schodt in his *Manga! Manga! The world of Japanese Comics* (1983). Coupled with the recent popularity of *anime* in Western countries, since the early 1990s' the number of Anglophonic academic monographs on *manga* has rapidly increased in various areas of study, e.g., cultural studies, sociology, and visual arts.

There is however a striking dearth of scholarship on 'school life' in *manga*, despite the following:

1. extensive academic recognition that the social affects of 'school' on Japanese children's lives (from infants to high school students) are severe and are experienced in thoroughly intense and complicated ways; and that
2. 'school' has been a popular setting for a diverse range of *manga* (e.g., fantasies, science fiction and psychological dramas).

There is a growing body of Anglophonic scholarship on Japanese school culture (Kinsella 2002; McVeigh 1996, 2000b, 2002; Yoneyama 1999), issues of violence in Japanese schools (Ruiz & Tanaka 2001; Smorti, Menesini & Smith 2003), as well as studies of the social identity of Japanese children in relation to schooling (Arai 2000; Field 1995; Tanaka 1997). It is noteworthy that there is a diverse range of literature examining representations of gender and sexuality in *manga* (Gatewood 2002; Grigsby 1999; Ito 1994, 1995, 2002; Matsui 1993; McLelland 2000a, 2000b; Ogi 2001a, 2001b, 2003; Onoda 2002; Orbaugh 2003; Pointon 1997; Setsu 1999; Thorn 2001; Treat 1996; Tsurumi 1997; 2000). Further, numerous research has been done on various issues: for example, the art of *manga* such as its symbolism, visual grammar and pedagogical value (Allen & Ingulsrud 2003; Nagata 1999; Adams 1999, 2000; Toku 2001; Chandler-Olcott & Mahar 2003); and the cultural consumption and reception of *manga* as media products (Befu 2003; Ching 1994; Cooper-Chen 1999; Desser 2003; Iwabuchi 2002; Kinsella 1995; Lee 2000; Levi 1998McVeigh 2000a; Napier 2001a, 2001b, 2002; Napier & Okada 2003; Newitz 1995; Ng 2000; Norris 2000; Schodt 1983, 1996; Shiraishi 2000).

In Japanese academia, there are socio-cultural/historical studies of representations of 'school' (Saitō J. 1996), child-parent/mother relationships (Yamashita 1991), and identity and gender/sexuality in *manga* (Kusaka 2000; Natsume 1997; Yonezawa 2002). Various researches have also been undertaken related to the art of *manga* (Satō T. 1984; Natume 1999) and the cultural consumption and reception of *manga*, including phenomenal 'cute culture' (Masubuchi 1994; Murasaki 1998; Ōtsuka 1989, 1990, 1991a, 1991b; Tada 2002) and '*otaku* culture' (Okada 2000). There are also numerous, although descriptive, accounts of individual art works of *manga* and their creators, as well as the history of *manga* in

Japan (Ishiko 1974; Kure 1990; Shimizu 1991; Yoshihiro 1993), which include various references to 'school', childhood and *manga*.

In an overview of the scholarship, however, the absence of (Anglophonic) studies examining images and representations of Japanese schools (primary/high school), school life and school culture in *manga* becomes salient. This is a serious omission in scholarship, as both *manga* and 'school' (and all related issues, e.g., education, recruitment, commercialism and Japanese socio-cultural structure) are dominant aspects of children's lives.

Issues of Japanese post-war education system
The Japanese educational system has been in serious crisis for some time, exposing the failure of the post-war social systems to target and redress the issues central to the welfare of school-age children. Numerous problems affecting children are now becoming socially recognised with new terms, such as *ijime* ([group] bullying), *gakkyū hōkai* (collapse of the classroom), *tōkō kyohi* (refusal to attend school/school phobia), *futōkō* (not attend school), *hikikomori* (social withdrawal, mostly males) and *enjo-kōsai* (teen age girls' prostitution). Teenage pregnancy, suicide and adolescent killings have also emerged as pressing social concerns. In Japan, "the tragedies involving students occur primarily in the school context" (Yoneyama 1999:10). The magnitude of these endemic problems signifies the need for such issues to be considered from within a complex social framework that includes socio-cultural, political and educational analyses.

The competition and control paradigm is an integral part of the Japanese socio-cultural system. In combination with the vertical and insular/group orientated system, which Nakane (1967, 1978) described with the term '*tate-shakai*' (the vertical society), this combination demands that members behave appropriately according to each situation, often promoting competition and inner-surveillance amongst the members. The presentation of an individual's integrity is not genuinely respected. Sugimoto (1990) claims that Japanese individuals are not intrinsically dependent, but rather self-centred with a desire to pursue their individual goals. Insofar as these goals are sanctioned by the normative orientation of the group, they are circumscribed by and therefore reinforce the power of the group, and so demand of their members' total obedience/compliance. The border and size of groups is rather arbitrary/fluid in each situation, thus the normative requirements of their allotted roles also differ accordingly (Masuhara 1984). The double standards (*honne* and *tatemae*) are therefore employed as a pragmatic method by which individuals cope with social and cultural pressures for conformity, and they play their expected 'role' without expressing the 'inner conflict' involved in suppressing their behaviour. Such adaptability is regarded as an essential qualification for being an 'adult'. The stability of the hierarchical structure of each group is underpinned by the members' 'harmonious' cooperation, inner-surveillance and full participation. What is neglected is the respect for individual identity. This falsehood is acute and revealed in schools where the ideal is officially promoted and idealistic youthfulness clashes with the pragmatic practices that actualise power over individuals.

Despite officially aiming at encouraging the individual student's development, in reality, the education system itself is dictated by, as well as reproductive of, this vertical social framework in that it places more importance on social demands over individuals' needs and preferences and by prohibiting alternatives. Teachers are an instrumental part of this system. And their dissident voices are often silenced. Many conscientious teachers suffer obvious contradictions from advocating this ideal, such as encouraging students' individuality and independence, only to implement different, even contradictory practices, such as encouraging students' capacity for rote learning, rather than thinking for themselves, and by selecting schools for students based on exam marks, not their preferences.

One problem is the inflexibility of the system, particularly the entrance examination. The current 6-3-3-4 system characterising primary, secondary and tertiary education was established by the Fundamental Law of Education and the School Education Law, in 1947. It is rigid and consistently applied all over Japan: Kindergarten (2-3 years), Elementary/Primary School (*shōgakkō*, 6 years), Lower secondary/Junior high school (*chū-gakkō*, 3 years); Upper secondary/Senior high school (*kōtō-gakkō*),[2] University (2 year junior college or 4 years), followed by post graduate studies (generally 2 years for the master course and 5 years for the doctorate course). Nine years in primary school and junior high school is compulsory. From senior high school, a student should pass the entrance examination to enter an institution of higher education. If successful in entering the institution, it is generally easy to graduate, but if students wish to change their institutions and/or faculties, often they have to go back through the examination process again.

This rigid Japanese system dictates people's lives. People are expected to undertake prescribed tasks according to the age-related stage which they are at in their lives. An individual failing to keep up the schedule would be regarded as a social dropout. The pressure experienced at the time of undertaking the entrance examination for senior high school is particularly intense. Despite the fact that more than 90% of children enter senior high school, senior high is not compulsory and therefore applicants must pass the entrance examination for admission. In the current system, a student is allowed only one attempt at the entrance examination for the public school system, but may make several attempts at entering private schools, depending on the cost and time of the examinations. Due to the limited opportunities, junior high school students have to carefully measure their ability and the level and competitiveness of the schools they desire to be students at. The success of the entrance examination for senior high school is therefore a major and stressful issue not only for the students, but also their teachers and parents.

The education system is directly linked to the workforce. The academic year for all schools and universities starts on the first of April and ends on the 31st March of the following year, which coincides with the beginning and end of the Japanese financial year. From kindergarten to university, the entrance ceremonies are held in early April and the graduation ceremony in late March. Likewise, company entrance ceremonies take place in early April. Since the end of the Second World War, it has become common practice to enter the workforce immediately after graduation from university or school. If a person fails

to find employment at that time, his/her value as a potential employee will fall sharply. It is very difficult to find a good position within this time frame or to change a job for the better. Age also is a crucial factor in finding employment as well as a marriage partner.

Beneath this view of life and practice, is the Japanese egalitarian belief in people's abilities, which can entail the refusal of individualistic differences (Nakane 1967). This belief has been promoted in the Japanese post-war educational system. The original idea was to genuinely encourage every child's potential to develop their capacity for learning, regardless of class or family background. However, a negative effect of this attitude has been the refusal to recognise the individual learning preferences of students, with many academically talented students required to stay in the same class with students who struggle with the same academic work. Skipping a grade in Japanese schools is not commonly practiced even today, although recently more choices of academic subjects have become available for students. Consequently, students are encouraged to present themselves as diligent, rather than intelligent and talented (McVeigh, 2002) and teachers focus on the 'average' student, and so no individual preferences for learning can actually be accommodated and catered for.

The attitude is also reflected in the choice of subjects. From primary school to university level, students are taught a wide range of subjects, rather than being able to focus on chosen subjects. The level of subject content is generally high and it is often the case that a considerable number of students just sit in the classroom, without comprehending what is taught. Even in university, a large portion of the university period is spent again for general education (foreign languages, physical education, law, maths, science, literature etc.), although general education at the university level has its merit. Many university students only start to concentrate on their own special area of interest in the late part of their second year, knowing that in the third year, they have to be concerned with their recruitment. Under the current system, real academic work is postponed to the postgraduate level for most students.

The scholastic preference given to general subjects is reproduced by the structure of entrance examinations, most of which consist of various subjects designed to evaluate the students' general yet possibly shallow knowledge, more than their ability for individual excellence. A student who obtained average marks would be preferred to one who was top in a language but failed the maths examination. Recently such problems were recognised and efforts have been made to redress this imbalance. However, the system still remains, as exemplified by the two day examinations conducted by National Centre for University Entrance Examinations (generally called Center *shiken*/examination). All tests in the exam are multiple choice and each test is 60-80 minutes in duration. It examines a wide range of knowledge-based questions, rather than examining an in-depth understanding of specific areas. In 2004, a total of 32 exams/subjects for 6 areas (Japanese, geography and history, civics, mathematics, science and a foreign language) were provided and national/public universities generally required seven exams for five subjects. More than 200 private universities also used parts of the examination (usually three subjects) as a first level of

aptitude screening for their entrance examination. The Center examination is generally followed by more specific examinations (e.g., essay writing, interviews) at each university. Similarly, postgraduate studies require the examination of specialised areas of study as well as a second-language, and often the latter becomes a serious obstacle for candidates.

Under these circumstances, particularly those created by the current examination system and the age-focussed aspect of society, Japanese egalitarianism has ironically promoted severe and continuing competition between students. Students are forced into a relentless process of study from infancy to the time they pass the university entrance examination. Moreover, this type of study inevitably creates a huge loss in time and energy. For example, basic subjects are repeatedly taught in primary school, in junior high and senior high school and again at university levels, although at each level it is only the quantity of materials studied that is representative of any difference in content. Many students undertake extra study in *juku* (cram school) or with private tutors, often leaning the same subjects before or after their leaning at school. As a result, the subject loses freshness and interest value. Students spend significant time undertaking their extra study, becoming exhausted in the process and often falling asleep in class as a result. A NHK (Nihon Hōsō Kyōkai) survey in 1979 showed that a quarter of primary school children and one third of junior high school students did not have enough sleep (Inamura 1981).

The critical fault of this educational problem stems from the lack of respect for the social value of individuality, which is consistent with Japanese society as a whole. Due to the obvious imbalance in power between children and adults (parents, teachers and vaguely society), current students' questions/criticism about inadequate support, including teachers' time and capabilities, are often expressed symptomatically, such as failure to attend school and school violence. This is not an individual teacher's problem. The problem lies in the system of educational practices and wider society, in which teachers are also powerless and/or victimised, and this appears to be recognised more so by children, than adults themselves.

Hosaka (1994) points out that from 1983, reported grievances about *ijime* (bullying) increased, indicating that students' negative reactions to school were being turned inwardly as a result of the superficially successful suppression of overt resistance towards authority. Expressions of this resistance range from involvement in motor cycle gangs to incidents of pre-mediated school violence. Schools fortify their control over students' lives by depriving them of free time with supplementary school activities. This has intensified students' experience of stress to such an unbearable level that in 'super controlled/supervised schools' (*chō kanri gakkō*) ordinary students, not just those identified and targeted as problematic, are through regimented control, also becoming stressed/burnt out and/or are uncharacteristically involved in bullying fellow students in dismal, cruel ways, often without justifiable reason.

The peak of *ijime* incidents was seen to occur in the first and second years of junior high schools. This is the period when most students start to realise their limited capability and

worry about their uncertain future. In the third year, most students' directions have been set and they concentrate on their study for their senior high school examination, with some sense of resignation. There is an additional issue which causes further pressure for students, and that is, *naishinsho*, a school report on their grades and everyday activities, which is required to be submitted with their application for the senior high school entrance examination. This report forces students to compete with their classmates. The situation forces students to participate in a 'good child competition', a 'loyalty (to teachers) competition' and an 'academic competition' (Yoneyama 1999:11). Through this process, students often face and realise the falsehood of their teachers and school and thus the deceptive contradictions of adults and society in general.

According to the official record, the number of *ijime* cases declined from the late 1980s, however, the actual level of *ijime* became more covert, sophisticated and systemised. Children have to take enormous care to maintain acceptable, arms-length friendships, in order for them not to be subjected to victimisation. Hosaka reports that a rigid seniority system (*senpai/kōhai* [senior/junior students]) often replaces or legitimates individual *ijime*. For example, a junior female high school student has to salute all of her senior female students everyday at school, although she can ignore her teachers and male senior students. This may be an example of 'excellent' facilitation of 'double standards: the implementation of the unreasonable control over individuals, under the pretence of 'respecting seniors'. The problem is students' fear the neglect of such unreasonable conduct to the extent that it causes the real threat, as a form of senior student's revenge/punishment. In addition, Hosaka warned that the system is often used by schools/teachers to control students.

In order to survive such an environment, it is inevitable that children develop adaptability, hiding their individuality and presenting themselves to suit each specific role required in a defined situation (e.g., the third year of junior high school), without question. It compels them to separate their inner world from their outer world, or self-presentation. If a student cannot do this well and genuinely internalises the external requirement, then they may end up suffering severe internal conflicts and lose the integrity of their subjectivity. The suicide of a junior high school boy, Shikagawa Firofumi, should be considered in this context as well as that of ijime (Miyagawa 1986). The number of children who need/seek psychiatric help has increased alarmingly in recent time, even though access to such care is extremely limited in Japan (Ishikawa 1990; Shiina 1997).

Since the early 1990s', many adults have consistently complained about the lack of subjectivity/initiatives of the younger generation, using various terms, such as *shijimachi ningen* (people who wait for instructions), *manual ningen, botsu-shutai* (void of subjectivity). However, the emergence of such a 'program-driven' (in Yoneyama's term) generation is rather a corollary of the educational system, which was enforced by social influences. Ironically, numerous companies now advertise on their websites that they are seeking to recruit people other than, *shijimachi ningen*.

This is the typical dilemma facing Japanese children today, and they are all too aware of the situation. It is cleaerly evident in the children's very low trust of adults and society (Inamura 1981). They are forced to give up or minimise their own desire/interest to participate in relentless and multi-layered competitions, whilst maintaining their superficial friendliness to protect themselves from victimisation. Many, however, feel that even if they succeed reasonably well, their promised success will not always be realised.

'School' in *manga*

Numerous *manga* stories are set in school environments. 'School' provides a natural background for children's everyday lives, with the negotiation of social experiences providing a multitude of focal points for storytelling, such as effort, competition and friendship in sports and/or love. Hence, representations of 'school' in *manga* are diverse, ranging from serious treatments of school-related themes to light-hearted, humoristic, and nonsensical depictions. Many of the recognisable problems children experience can be threaded through the serialised storytelling of a particular *manga*, as either the main or sub theme of the narrative. For example, one of the most popular and controversial stories, *Great Teacher Onizuka* (GTO), depicts everyday students' desperate quest for self-esteem and trustful relationships, whilst suffering resentment from and distrust for adults and society as a whole.

The image of the idealised 'school' may be set in primary schools as in Tezuka's *Tetsuwan Atomu* (*Astro Boy*) and Miyazaki Hayao's *Tonari no Totoro* (*My Neighbor Totoro*), where children enjoy their lives under the supervision of caring, friendly and respected class teachers. *My Neighbor Totoro*, released as an *anime* in 1988, was set in a rural area near Tokyo, in the late 1950s. When 4-year-old Mei, one of the film's central characters, tearfully comes to school to be with her sister, 11-year-old Satsuki, Satsuki's teacher (a middle aged, confident, female) allowed her to sit in the class. Prior to this reunion, the teacher singles out a male student in the class, Kanta, who, rather than studying, is idly watching Satsuki, an act of inattention that earns him being lightly hit on the head by the teacher with her book. Kanta is embarrassed and the other students laugh, but the classroom atmosphere is cheerful and stable. However, this scene is drawn on only as a backdrop, rather than the main location of the children's activities. The atmosphere is imbued with nostalgia, and limited more to primary schools. The minor world of Satsuki's school is readily accepted by the viewer in this scenario as it is set in the 1950s, a nostalgic representation from an 'other world'.

In real primary schools the class teacher often embodies unconditional authority. Without the ability to resist and/or criticise their teachers and school rules, many primary school children experience daily authority as a form of oppressive regime of control that contributes to as well as compounds their sense of failure when they are unable to meet learning requirements. Although the majority of teachers can be considered good and genuinely committed to helping children, there is evidence that a percentage of teachers who believe it their right to use their power, often comprising verbal abuse and corporal

punishment. Even enthusiastic yet simple-minded teachers can be inadvertently harmful, when they enforce (unreasonable) rules/policies rigidly (e.g., to eat only during lunch time; empty their bowels before coming to school rather going to the toilet during class time) regardless of individual's differences (Ishikawa 1985).

Representations of children's resentment of the pressures imposed on them may be found in various *manga*, as exemplified by Nagai Gō's *Harenchi gakuen* (Shameless School), which was published intermittently between 1968 and 1972 in *Weekly Boys' Jump*. This *manga* is steeped in "taboo-smashing humor", and it has "aroused the wrath of PTAs (Parents and Teachers' Associations) across Japan by introducing overt eroticism into children's comics and mocking Japan's monolithic educational system" (Schodt, 1983:122). In the story, the position of teacher-student is reversed. Teachers are thoroughly ridiculed and degraded by their bizarre, indecent and abnormal clothing, behaviour and speech, such as their obsession towards seeing girls' naked bodies and underwear. The battle between the teachers and children is evoked by a teacher's shameless and irresponsible behaviours (e.g., trying to steal children's lunches) and ending with the children's cooperative execution of outlandish forms of revenge. Saitō asserted that this story threatened 'conscientious' adults who reacted emotionally, for Nagai Gō championed the children's side and ridiculed the dignity of 'school', revealing the real state of the adult-children relationships, which was glossed over in the official sanctioning of regimented education (1996:20-29). Ueno (1972) saw the extraordinary energy directed towards 'ridiculing adults' authority' as an indicator of the massive pressure authority exerted on children's lives at the time.

This paper, however, focuses on two light-hearted manga: *Doraemon*, set in a primary school, and *Azumanga*, set in a senior high school, to see how such seemingly comical *manga* accurately displays the psychic landscape of 'school' and students' lives. They have variously contrasting aspects as well as similarities, and probe many issues facing children in their everyday lives, and their need for their own enclave.

Doraemon
Doraemon is a story of a 22nd century cat-like robot (Doraemon), with a fourth dimensional pocket containing numerous gadgets, who becomes a 'guardian angel' to Nobi Nobita, a natural, yet cowardly, mischievous and lazy school boy. This *manga*, created by Fujiko F. Fujio (real name: Fujimoto Hiroshi) in 1969, gained national popularity in Japan, and in many other South-East Asian countries, through magazines targeting primary school children, paperback comics, *anime* (TV from 1979 and movies from 1980) and videos/DVDs, as well as successful spin-off merchandise.

Schodt accounts for the widespread, inter-generational popularity of the *manga* with the following observation: "[f]or a modern children's manga, *Doraemon* is remarkably gentle, eschewing violence, eroticism, scatology, and sensationalism in favour of a low-key, optimistic, and reassuring approach" (1996:219). The strong point of the *manga*'s success is in its stability, in other words, its 'mannerism'. Despite the enormous number of episodes (more than 1300[3]), the story framework is consistent:

1. Nobita gets in trouble and asks Doraemon to help;
2. With or without his permission, Nobita borrows Doraemon's tools to solve his problems, although Doraemon first encourages Nobita to attack the problem himself;
3. Nobita solves the problem or uses the tools to initiate some mischief, ending with a light punishment for Nobita, or his embarrassment.

Fujiko F Fujio attributes the success of *Doraemon* to the fact that it responds to readers' desires for the fulfilment of their wishes (Schodt, 1996:218). However, the key to the 'wish fulfilment' perception is always via the use of Doraemon's tools and almost always highlighting the absence of Nobita's personal strength and effort. Nobita is totally incompetent, and is dependent on Doraemon for assistance, which he repeatedly begs from the robot cat for, with Nobita always having access to the dream tools of Doraemon to achieve his goals. This does not encourage readers/audiences to develop an acceptance of themselves, nor foster their own independence. Nobita is guaranteed to win his ideal girlfriend, Shizuka-chan, for his wife, without any actual competition with her other admirers, such as the gentle and diligent Dekisugi-kun (literally, Mr. Too-good).

Natsume (1993) indicates that Doraemon embodies the traits of a caring, aunt-like guardian, particularly with regard to the placement of Doraemon's eyes in the upper part of the face and his rounded body shape. Natsume also suggests that Fujiko's plain, stable drawing lines create an uncomplicated sense of the present, free from emotional, nostalgic shadows. Saita (1997) underscores Doraemon's pocket as a space which fulfils the readers/audience's desire to return to the safety and comfort of their mother's womb. And Takada (1995) sees *Doraemon* as presenting a problematic and unhealthy image for identification as its thematisation of 'wish fulfilment' embodies the dream of 'accomplishments without effort, but by favouritism'. It could be suggested that *Doraemon*'s popularity partly stems from its easing of children's anxiety over the loss of parental love due to their failure to be good and diligent.

The story creates a stable, relieving ambience, well balanced between the reality of children's everyday life and the fantastic factors, represented by Doraemon's reassuring presence and his pocket. One example of how reality is sustained is that of the constant presence of Nobita's school and his teacher. When school is depicted, Nobita is repeatedly scolded by his teacher for forgetting his homework or when his mischief is discovered. His class teacher also appears outside of the school environment, such as when he visits Nobita's home to talk with his mother about his problems. His teacher is a middle-aged, gentle man, with a round body and rather square face. His demeanour is dignified and non-threatening. Similarly, the school does not create any real threats or place any pressure on Nobita, although he always fails his schoolwork and class-room activities. Nobita is often bullied by Jaian and Suneo, but again not very seriously. Nobita immediately cries and begs Doraemon for his help, often to enact revenge. In short, school and teachers are not central

to Nobita's life, just a normal yet unavoidable background for Nobita and the other children.

The main arena for the children's activities in *Doraemon* is a small vacant patch of land with a few concrete pipes. This is evocative of a nostalgic, past representing a 'timeless utopia' (Natsume 1993). It may however represent a mix of the children's imagination and their reality, or represent a liminal or transitional space that combines elements of the urban past with those that are contemporary. Although Dekisugi-kun sometimes joins them, the core group habituating this location/play space are consistently four children, Nobita, Shizuka, Jaian and Suneo, all of whom Doraemon generally conducts his adventures with. The playgroup is formed by only classmates. This is unlike the traditional formation of children's neighbourhood playgroups, which once consisted of children from different ages. Fukaya & Fukaya (1976) indicated from their survey, that by 1975, children's definition of 'friends' excluded children of different ages. They also mention that children's playing areas have shrunk to within a radius of five minutes of their home and most playing/games take place indoors. This underscores the significant change in children's lives and activities, because of their loss of time and space for playing outside due to the increase in study time, the disappearance of vacant land and so forth. This development also affects their view of life and their relationships with others, both friends and family. With the collapse of playgroups comprising different aged friends, older children's experiences are no longer handed down to the younger generation, thus each generation faces their difficult life experiences without previous knowledge or appropriate advice. Similarly, with the neighbourhood support system disappearing, parents also have to confront their children without adequate knowledge and mental preparation. A degree of alienation is forced on the family members' close relationships, requiring their immediate confrontation without leaving them any necessary breathing space or enclave to withdraw to.

Under these circumstances, Doraemon plays a role of a sweet guardian angel, who accepts children, even mischievous children like Nobita, and tirelessly helps them by giving them what they want, instead of compelling them to be good, hardworking and prepared for finding a solution to their problems. One of Doraemon's popular gadgets is *dokodemo-door* (any-where door), which was also desired by adults, especially salary-men who suffer the rush–hour congestion of bodies in trains (*Doraemon no himitsu* [secrets], quoted in Schodt 1996: 218-219). This may indicate that both children and adults start to share the suffering of their lost freedom.

Azumanga Daiō
Azuma Kiyohiko's *Azumanga daiō* (Azuma + manga + great king) is a relatively new *manga*. The original comprised four panel strips, serialised in a monthly comic magazine, *Dengeki Daiō*, and later republished in a 4 volume comic set (2000-2002), adapted for a movie (2001), short online movie (Azumanga Web Daio), repackaged as a DVD as well as a TV anime version (from April to September 2002). It is like a collection of short, independent episodes (5 minutes in *anime* form), sketching a small group of unique girls

and their daily high school experiences, from their entrance ceremony to graduation. It includes yearly school events, such as cultural festivals, athletic meetings, summer vacations, however, the focus is consistently limited to the activities of the group of girls.

Azumanga provides a realistic feeling with faithful depictions of the girls' surroundings, including their school facilities and their possessions such as their private rooms and mobile phones. Similar to *Doraemon*, the world of *Azumanga* is limited almost to the neighbourhood of the school apart from school excursions and one of the girl's family holiday house. The central stage of the story is their classroom, which is equivalent to *Doraemon*'s playground.

The story however revolves around a gifted and cute, 10 year old girl, Mihama Chiyo, who has entered senior high school, and her high school classmates and three teachers. With a rather simple drawing style, all of the main characters are depicted uniquely and individualistically. The core group comprises seven students: Chiyo-chan; the tall, shy cat-loving Sakaki-san (excellent athlete); Osaka (Kasuga Ayumu from Osaka) the daydreamer; the hyper active and mischievous Tomo (Takino Tomo, Yomi's long term friend); the intelligent Yomi (Mizuhara Koyomi, challenger of various diets); Kagura the swimmer; and Kaorin who admires Sakaki. Osaka, Tomo and Kagura are competing for low marks, whilst Chiyo is the best student, followed by Yomi and Sasaki. The huge gaps between their academic abilities, however, have no bearing on their cheerful and caring friendships. Their school life is all the more colourful in conjunction their three distinctive teachers: their classroom and English teacher, the delinquent and self-centred Yukari sensei/-chan (Tanizaki Yukari); the caring, capable and respected PE teacher Nyamo (Kurosawa Minamo, Yukari's long term friend and rival); and the excentric, weird male teacher, Kimura, who teaches classical Japanese language/literature but often appears at Nyamo's swimming lessons to see the girls in their swimsuits, having confessed that he became a teacher as a result of his interest in girls, such as Kaorin.

The *manga* is characterised by its harmless, humoristic gags. Its hilarity is largely created by the character of Osaka. Her tempo is slow and she is incompetent in academic and physical activities, and is frequently subjected to the distracting influence of her own thoughts and imagination, which result in Osaka's total detachment from her immediate surrounding, becoming prone to asking completely and totally irrelevant questions. With her presence, the *manga* shares the same type of humour with Igarashi Mikio's popular four-panel *manga*, *Bonobono*, in which a philosophical boy otter is the main character.

Azumanga represents the world from the students' subjective point of view. This is exemplified by the exclusion of other classmates, who are not close to the group, and who are sometimes depicted as simple, white silhouettes. Although the story develops in the space of the school, the main stage is the classroom and only the limited key characters are detailed.

The girls' mental landscape is also represented by the *manga*'s firm exclusion of the realistic depiction of parents and other family members. Chiyo's family is wealthy, living in a mansion on a huge, leafy property. Her relationship with her parents is good, with her father arranging for a large car to be available for the girls and two teachers for travelling to their seaside holiday house. However, her parents are not visualised, except her father's occasional appearances as a huge, yellow cat-like creature, derived from Sakaki's dream. Even when Chiyo prepares breakfast for her parents, only their bedroom door is depicted and the scene is quickly changed. Instead, her large white dog, Tadakichi-san, accompanies her in and outside of her huge home. Similarly, when Yomi is sick in bed, only her mother's voice is heard to let her know Tomo and the others have called. Tomo sometimes spends time in Yomi's room, however, she enters through the window and does not see Yomi's family. None of the girls and teachers seems to have siblings. A typical scene involving them being at home is exemplified by Sakaki who is often depicted in her room alone, looking at pictures of cats. They are happy or calm when alone in their rooms, often in their beds, suggesting no sense of loneliness or anxiety.

A cheerful atmosphere, full of laughter, is consistent throughout many of the light-hearted, "feel good" episodes comprising the *Azumanga*. The girls develop their friendship through the frank presentation of their individual personalities and the acceptance of the others'. This expresses the desire for true friendships, rather than the reflection of the reality in which the pressure for social conformity overwhelms the respect for individual differences. In this manga, all the girls have strong and weak points, but together they compensate one another. They are a group but also have respective communications with each other as individuals. Chiyo's multi-talented ability is exhibited not only through her outstanding achievements, but also her wide ranging knowledge of general matters (e.g., how to wear kimono) and her love of cooking. She is caring, cheerful and polite, but dislikes being second. With her small physique as a ten year old, she is helpless in athletic activities and wishes to grow quickly. She represents a stark contrast to Sakaki in many ways, yet they support each other. Sakaki's taciturnity is contrasted with Tomo's talkativeness. Tomo and Yomi are old friends but are very different as personalities and in their abilities. The daydreamer Osaka's pace is slow, contrasting with the restlessness characterising Tomo.

The idealism is also seen in the absence of jealousy amongst this group of girls. As Doi (1997) points out, the egalitarian policy is promoted to eliminate jealousy, but ironically it has only suppressed people's awareness of jealousy, and jealousy itself thrives in society invisibly to become sources of *ijime*. Chiyo has many envious attributes (e.g., her outstanding intelligence and wealth), yet she has a small physique and is hopeless at athletics, which can in reality make her a target of envy and/or *ijime* (bullying). There is however no sign of jealousy amongst her friends, instead, they admire and rely on her. Once Kagura saw Sakaki as her athletic rival, but this rivalry quickly disappears when she realises that Sakaki has no interest in competition between them for status and even had difficulties in remembering the races she had won. In contrast, the rivalry between the teachers, Yukari and Nyamo, is constant and consuming, outrageous even, yet comically displayed. The absence of jealousy and the acceptance of differences secures a free and

stable form of intersubjective exchange between the girls that this *manga* episodically cultivates through its storytelling, and therefore for the readers/audiences themselves.

Through the respective, often unrelated and repetitive, episodes, a close friendship of understanding and acceptance is quietly yet steadily developed between Chiyo and Sakaki. Their personal intimacy starts with Chiyo's dog, Tadakichi, as a mediator. Sakaki loves animals but she cannot have one at her home, so she willingly accompanies Chiyo when she takes Tadakichi for a walk. One evening in the park, Chiyo sees children skipping rope and reminisces about her primary school years. Sakaki, realising Chiyo's lonely feeling, invites her to jump rope, after the children have left. At the athletic festival, Sakaki's rather blunt '*Daijōbu*' (It's OK) is uttered with determination to assure and comfort the panicked Chiyo, who is very worried about her slowness and that her team may fail the relay race. Sakaiki is a shy loner. She is content to be alone without a sense of isolation. But when exposed to Chiyo's childlike openness and sincere warmth, she starts to associate more with the others. Chiyo is also independent, but she is happy to rely on Sakaki and her sincerity. With their inner strength and genuine warmth, both Chiyo and Sasaki appear to represent the ideal and desired individuals, and the significance of their presence and their friendship express a positive message to the readers/audiences.

Conclusion

This paper has looked at the representation of 'school' and 'school life' in *manga*, in relation to the socio-cultural and educational issues of children, the readers of such manga. Endemic problems involving children are mostly school related, indicating a structural failure in the postwar educational system and the political and socio-cultural framework as a whole.

This paper has outlined the intensity and complexity of social pressure imposed upon children. One of the essential issues lies in the structural failure of educational systems to recognise and promote the inherent value of individuality. In the post-war period of rapid economic growth, the entrance examination system underpinned the provision of equal opportunity for Japanese youths with academic talents, enabling them to attain tertiary qualifications and hence attain higher social position and status within Japanese society. The economical success was credited to the workers' harmonious cooperation, supported by the seniority system. Accordingly, education has placed children into a competitive system for academic excellence that can yield a loyal and harmonious personality, thereby moulding them as obedient and efficient workers, whilst officially promoting the encouragement of the individual's ability and independence. Today's emergence of a problematic young generation, who rely on manuals and the authority of others for instructions, is the natural result.

Under systematic pressure to study and participate in school activities, children's free time and social space has shrunk, although it can be said that they have more free time compared to children in the past who were taxed with menial chores. Children have begun to express their need for time to 'sleep' and recuperation. *Manga* is a limited resource that is widely

used for children's relaxation and it has become a keenly observed arena to reflect their desires and problems.

Although there are numerous *manga*, some of which represents children's concerns and resentment more directly and harshly, this paper has endeavoured to focus on the light-hearted *manga*, *Doraemon* and *Azumanga* to see how mild *manga* can faithfully reflect children's reality and their needs and desires. Despite their cheerful appearances, both texts depict children's inability to trust adults and their desire for true friendship amongst themselves. *Doraemon* continuously shows Nobita's reliance on Doraemon and his favouritism. Its popularity suggests children's desire to remain in their childhood, refusing to participate as adult members of society. Similarly, *Azumanga* reveals children's mental and social sphere being limited to their group of friends, to the exclusion of 'others' through their recurring depiction as white silhouetted classmates or visually absent parents.

Contrasted to the utopian-like confined sphere of *Doraemon* in which time only circulates endlessly (Otsuka, 1987:119), time flows in *Azumanga* as the friendships, particularly between Chiyo and Sakaki, grow steadily. The presence of unique characters and their mutual acceptance of their differences provide an alternative social world to the competition based educational structure. Similarly, the students' attitudes towards their ridiculed teachers display their sense of sympathy and pity, which also complicates the rigid polarisation of children against teachers and school.

School in *manga* presents a special sphere of social interaction that only exists within a limited time and space in children's lives, which as students they must go through and leave, but teachers remain within perhaps unchanged. How we are to understand *manga* as both representing children's desire and as an accurate reflection of their reality warrants further study. However *Azumanga*, as well as many other *manga*, indicate a certain positive feeling about the characters' attitudes towards life and their future, which seems to me to be a sign of children's resilience and desire for independence, without being given a choice to enact it.

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[1] *Shōnen Jump* was founded by Shūeisha in 1968 and it closley followed the already established format of weekly boys' magazines (e.g., *Shūkan Shōnen Magazine* by Kōdansha and *Shūkan Shōnen Sunday* by Shōgakkan, both started in 1959). It contains, more than 400 pages, with around 20 stories, mostly serialised. *Shūkan Shōnen Jump*'s was a late comer, but with its strong editorial policy aimed at responding to readers' needs and its successful commercialisation (e.g., merchandising of stories and characters), it became the best-selling weekly boys' magazine in 1980. It achieved sales of 6.5 million copies in 1995. As a magazine is often circulated among friends, the actual readership is estimated to be much larger than the number of the copies sold.

[2] "Also, pursuant to the amendments to the School Education Law and other legislation in June 1998, the five-year secondary school can be established to enable consistent education covering teachings at both lower and upper secondary schools from FY1999" (http://www.mext.go.jp/english/org/formal/13.htm)

[3] According to *Doraemon-gaku colloquium,* the total number of *Doraemon* episodes is 1,344 (http://www.inf.toyama-u.ac.jp/doraemon/dora_gaku/index42.html).