IMPORTANCE OF "LOCAL" IN A CENTRALIZED EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM: A BLUMERIAN STUDY OF SCHOOL UNIFORM CHANGES IN JAPAN

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While the centralized character of Japanese education has been widely discussed in the scholarship of Japan studies and comparative education, little attention has been given to educational decision-making at local levels.[1] This paper questions the centralization assumption and examines the local contingencies of educational decisions in Japan. While I do not dispute the significance of the Ministry of Education for setting a standard to be followed by schools, local implementation of the Ministry's guidelines is contingent upon how educators at each school interpret these to fit their needs. Using recent changes in rules as a case, I will show how educators' interpretations of some conditions at these institutions resulted in variations in rule changes. In the 1980s and the 1990s, many schools evaluated the appropriateness of regulations and subsequently relaxed their control of students' lifestyles.[2] The Ministry of Education issued the instruction to all schools to reassess rules in April 1988,[3] which claimed to

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[1] Merry White, *The Japanese Educational Challenge: A Commitment to Children* (New York: The Free Press, 1988), pp. 169-170; Edward R. Beauchamp, *Japanese and U.S. Education Compared* (Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, 1992), pp. 9-12; James J. Shields, *Japanese Schooling: Patterns of Socialization, Equality, and Political Control* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989); Harry Wray, *Japanese and American Education: Attitudes and Practices* (Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, 1999), pp. 30-31; Sakamoto Hideo, *Taibatsu no kenkyū* [Research on Corporal Punishment] (Tokyo: Sanichi shobo, 1995); and Shoko Yoneyama, *The Japanese High School: Silence and Resistance* (London: Routledge, 1999).

[2] Ministry of Education, *Nichijo no seito shido no arikata ni kansuru chosa kenkyū hokokusho* [Survey Report on Everyday Student Guidance] (1991, 1998); and Nakane Tsuneo, *Gakko no jitsujō* [Current State of Schools] (Tokyo: Fubosha, 1998).

[3] The instruction by the Ministry classified school rules into three main

have set the stage for the nationwide deregulation of schools' control over students' appearance and deportment.[4] Following the instruction to revise rules, the Ministry of Education in collaboration with the Association of Secondary School Principals in Japan conducted nationwide surveys on student guidance.[5] The Ministry's reports quantitatively documented the pervasiveness of school rule changes in the late 1980s and the 1990s. In the 1991 report, 69% of secondary schools responded that they had revised their rules between April 1988 and November 1990. In addition, 23% of the schools were in the process of revising at the time.[6]   This trend continued and even intensified in the 1998 study, which indicated that 81% of schools had revised rules between 1993 and 1997, and an additional 8% were considering revision at the time.[7]

While the nationwide school rule changes may be indicative of the power of the Ministry to engineer changes in school practices, I found some variations in rule changes among schools that cannot be attributed to national influences. In Joyo City in Kyoto Prefecture and Nara City in Nara Prefecture, for example, school uniform regulations at junior high schools were identical in the early 1980s: a traditional military style uniform for

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types: 1. Rules which need to be enforced totally; 2. Rules which should be considered as goals to attain; and 3. Rules which should be left at students' discretion (Ministry of Education 4/25/1988). This framework was used by school administrators to assess school rules. For example, the city board of education in Uji City in Kyoto Prefecture analyzed existing rules in nine junior high schools under its jurisdiction and classified rules into three types concretely based on the Ministry's instruction. At the school level, an assistant principal in Joyo City in Kyoto commented that the Ministry's framework was used for a reassessment of the rules at his school in the late 1980s (Interview 6/3/1998). The Ministry provided the framework for schools and boards of education to utilize for school rule revision.

[4] Nakane, *Gakko no jitsujō*, pp. 200-202.

[5] The Ministry of Education sent a questionnaire to 1,633 secondary schools in 1991 to inquire about each school's effort to assess and revise rules. Ninety percent of those schools (1,472) responded to the questionnaire. Similarly, in 1998, the Ministry conducted a similar survey among 1,653 schools, of which 1,453 schools (87.9%) responded.

[6] Ministry of Education, 1991.

[7] Ministry of Education, 1998.

boys and a sailor suit for girls. However, by the mid-1990s, three schools in Joyo City changed their uniforms to a more popular blazer while two others did not change. In Nara City, eight out of nineteen schools preserved the existing regulation, while three schools switched to a blazer and eight others did not use any school uniforms. By examining how such diversity in school uniform rules developed, this paper provides insight as to how nationally legitimated changes in Japan are still contingent, at least in some cases, upon educators' interpretations of local contexts.

Analytical Framework: Blumer's Sensitivity to Local Interpretations of Conditions

My focus on local variations is encouraged by Herbert Blumer's analytical emphasis on people's interpretations. Blumer sensitizes us to look for people's opinions on local specific conditions, which he considers significant for guiding social change. The importance of these conditions and people's understanding of them has been overlooked in past analyses of educational changes that have primarily focused on global and national levels. Recent studies on educational change focus on the global similarity of educational institutional structures and practices, such as the formation of organizations, compulsory mass schooling, and the indoctrination of individualism.[8] They direct our attention to the global "institutional

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[8] Francisco O. Ramirez, "Institutional Analysis," *Institutional Structure: Constituting State, Society, and the Individual*, eds. George Thomas, John W. Meyer, Francisco O. Ramirez, and John Boli (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1987); Francisco O. Ramirez and John Boli, "Global Patterns of Educational Institutionalization," *Institutional Structure: Constituting State, Society, and the Individual*; Paul J. DiMaggio and Walter W. Powell, "The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields," *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*, eds. Walter W. Powell and Paul J. DiMaggio (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); John W. Meyer and Brian Rowan, "The Structure of Educational Organizations," *Organizational Environments: Ritual and Rationality*, eds. John W. Meyer and W. Richard Scott (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1983); and John W. Meyer, "Rationalized Environments," *Institutional Environments and Organizations*, eds. W. Richard Scott and John W. Meyer (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994).

culture," within which organizational structures are "not only influenced but also internally constituted."[9] Global institutional culture refers to "general cultural elements that are in principle applicable to particular institutions (e.g. education, religion, medicine) everywhere across societies."[10] From this standpoint, therefore, educational change is regarded as a consequence of "the systemic influence of the modern world culture."[11] Rather than being attuned toward political, economic, and social contexts of local schools, educational change is analyzed as a response to the globalized institutional models of educational structures and practices.

Another strand of explanation of educational change focuses on the power of the state. The state-centered view explains alterations in these practices in terms of the state control over education, for example, by examining how the state uses education to develop the meanings of citizenship in countries such as Cuba, Tanzania, and China.[12] Changes in education were attributed to the state's attempt to impose particular identity and knowledge among the population. Current scholarship on the Japanese educational system with its focus on the Ministry of Education resonates with this analytical focus on state power.[13] In studying the Japanese

[9] John W. Meyer, John Boli, and George M. Thomas, "Ontology and Rationalization in the Western Cultural Account," *Institutional Environments and Organizations*, p. 15.

[10] Meyer, Boli, and Thomas, "Ontology and Rationalization," p. 22.

[11] Ramirez, "Institutional Analysis," p. 323; DiMaggio and Powell, "The Iron Cage Revisited"; and Meyer, "Rationalized Environments," pp. 40-45.

[12] Bruce Fuller, *Growing-Up Modern: The Western State Builds Third World Schools* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Martin Carnoy and Joel Samoff, *Education and Social Transition in the Third World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Jacques Hallak, *Investing in the Future: Setting Educational Priorities in the Developing World* (Paris: UNESCO, 1990); Don Adams and Esther E. Gottlieb, *Education and Social Change in Korea* (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1993); and Michael Apple, *Education and Power* (Boston: Routledge, 1982).

[13] Yoshio Sugimoto, *Introduction to Japanese Society* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 120-122; Yoneyama, *The Japanese High School*; Okano Kaori and Tsuchiya Motonari, *Education in Contemporary Japan: Inequality and Diversity* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Shields, *Japanese Schooling*, pp. 215-

educational system, White stresses the decisive roles played by the Ministry of Education in "supervis[ing] all aspects of education."[14] Shoko Yoneyama comments similarly that "in the past four decades, state intervention in things to do with the content of education became incomparably coercive in Japan."[15] Postwar educational changes in Japan were engineered by the leadership of the Ministry of Education, whose "priorities had shifted to the dissemination of knowledge and the selection of human resources to meet the emerging needs in the economy."[16] These scholars explain changes in the educational system and practices in terms of state intervention for economic development and the construction of national identity.

While these explanations provide important insight on macroscopic forces engineering changes in education, this paper raises the question of whether educational changes legitimized by the central authority are automatically incorporated into local practices. Are teachers and school administrators merely adapting to a blueprint set by the central educational authority? Or do they consider their local surroundings before making decisions to change? Informed by Blumer's analytical framework, I give attention to "local conditions and people's interpretive processes" that may have had an impact on school rule changes.

Blumer's thesis on how industrialization influences changes in the structure and culture of local community provides an analytical framework for this study. In his posthumously published work, *Industrialization as an Agent of Social Change*, Blumer argues that the actual impact of industrialization on social change, such as the shift from the extended to nuclear family and the increasing dominance of contractual relationships, depends upon how people in local contexts interpret and respond to the forces of industrialization.[17] According to Blumer:

> The industrializing process does not operate in a social vacuum. It takes place always in a social setting with people, culture,

223; White, *The Japanese Educational Challenge*, pp. 169-170; and Beauchamp, *Japanese and U.S. Education Compared*.

[14] White, *The Japanese Educational Challenge*, p. 170.

[15] Yoneyama, *The Japanese High School*, p. 148.

[16] Okano and Tsuchiya, *Education in Contemporary Japan*, p. 49.

[17] Herbert Blumer, *Industrialization as an Agent of Social Change* (Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter, 1990).

institutions, and social organization. It is to be expected that if the social settings differ *significantly*, the changes induced in them by the industrializing process will differ.[18]

He further explains his orientation by emphasizing the local interpretive processes through which people and communities orient their responses:

> We would have to ask in the case of any given type of industrialization, at what point it enters into group life, what it encounters and what takes place in the encounter….At each point of contact, it is met by people who are called on to respond to what is presented to them. The people bring to their task of responding to varieties of norms, attitudes, wishes, and established ways of action; they are also called on to assess what confronts them and to work out lines of action. Since what they bring to the given confrontation may vary and since their assessments of it may vary, their responses may similarly vary.[19]

Blumer encourages us not to be satisfied with an identification of broader historical conditions to explain social changes that are taking place in many locales. Instead, he argues that we must look at how people act based on their interpretations of concrete situations in relation to national and global influences. Inspired by Blumer's orientation, I studied how teachers and school officials interpreted local conditions concerning school rules and whether or not their interpretations led to different outcomes. In this paper, I present how local educators' interpretations of students' rule violations, community culture, and the timing of school rule assessment contributed to variations in school uniforms in Joyo and Nara City. I also argue that, while the national and global forces may exert significant influences on educational changes, it is important to be sensitive to local contingencies of macro-level influences that may lead to diverse outcomes.

Data and Methods
My findings in this paper are derived from two major sources: primary documents, such as written records of school rules and school

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[18] Blumer, *Industrialization as an Agent*, p. 134.
[19] Blumer, *Industrialization as an Agent*, p. 133.

newsletters, and interviews collected during my fieldwork in Japan in the summers of 1998 and 1999. I concentrated my fieldwork on two cities, Joyo City in Kyoto Prefecture and Nara City in Nara Prefecture, since I observed local variations in uniforms among schools in these locales. I collected written records of school rules from all five junior high schools in Joyo City and ten of nineteen junior high schools in Nara City. I obtained information about school uniforms from educators in Nara City at the other nine schools.

I also interviewed teachers and school officials in these two cities. In Joyo City, I conducted 13 interviews with members of the city board of education, school principals, and teachers. Eight interviews with school principals, teachers and a city board member were conducted in Nara City. All interviewees had spent at least twenty years in the school district (at the time of the interviews), either as a teacher or an administrator, and thus were in a position to have had a first-hand experience about debates on school uniforms at their schools. Interviews were open-ended, allowing interviewees to take ample time to recollect how school rule debates progressed and what was decisive for the school's final decision for or against change. Interviewees informed me about which local conditions came into discussion and how they were interpreted at their schools in the late 1980s and the 1990s.

Interviewees provided not only spoken information, but also primary documents, including school newsletters, student leaflets published by the student council, and the directives issued by the boards of education to each school, which are rich sources for understanding local processes of school rule changes. Written sources were also used to cross-reference the information provided in interviews, and to reduce the possibility of misrepresentation. Cumulatively, school newsletters, reports from schools submitted to the local boards of education, and interviews provided me with pivotal information on what conditions were taken into consideration and how they were negotiated prior to the decisions made regarding uniforms. This highlighted aspects of educational decision-making that escape many of the studies concentrating on the role of the central authority.

In the following sections, I will first describe variations in school uniforms in both cities and also briefly discuss changes in other rules that were similar across schools. Secondly, I will discuss why such variations in the school uniform emerged in these two cities. I will organize my discussion in terms of three interpretations of conditions that teachers and school officials identify as influential on variations of school uniforms.

School Uniform Changes in Joyo City and Nara City

In comparing rule changes at schools in Joyo and Nara, I found that despite similarities, changes in school uniforms varied locally. For example, all five junior high schools in Joyo City eliminated rules on bags, caps, shoes, and socks. Also, all five schools no longer have rules that prohibit students from going to movie theaters or video arcades. Written records of school rules indicate that hairstyle regulations have changed in all five schools.

Table 1. Hairstyle Regulations in Joyo City

Pre-Change (1980s)	Male students: The front must be shorter than one's eyebrows, the side shorter than the top of one's ears, and the back must be shorter than the collar.
	Female students: The front must be shorter than one's eyes; if the side or the back touches one's shoulder, she must tie it up (with a band in black, brown, or navy blue).
	In addition, perm, dye, the use of a ribbon, partial mohawk style, shaving off eyebrows, chap stick, and any make-up is prohibited.
Post-Change (1998)	Both Male and Female: Hairstyle appropriate for Jr. high students; adornments such as a ribbons should not be ostentatious.

Rule changes in Nara City's schools were also similar. A student guidance teacher at Tomio Junior High School told me:

> School rules in Nara City are in general similar across schools. But some rules may differ from school to school, due to the character of parents, students, and the community.[20]

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[20] Interview 6/16/1999.

I collected written school rule records from ten schools in Nara City. These schools no longer have rules on shoes, socks, and caps, and eliminated the use of school-designated bags. Also, eight of these ten schools had rules on hairstyle regulations identical to those of the five schools in Joyo City in 1998. Written records I collected from the other two schools did not mention hairstyles at all.

In the spirit of Blumer, I looked for variations in local school rule changes at the time when rule revisions were nationally legitimized by the Ministry of Education. What I found was that many schools did make similar rule changes. This suggests that Blumer's emphasis on sensitivity to local variations may not be significant for understanding most school rule changes in Japan. However, I also found that school uniforms that were once identical among these schools varied by the time of my fieldwork. The following table describes uniform rules in these two cities in 1998.

Table 2. School Uniforms in Joyo and Nara in 1998

	Traditional[21]	Blazer	No Prescribed Dress
Joyo City (5 schools)	2 schools	3 schools	None
Nara City (19 schools)	8 schools	3 schools	8 schools

In the early 1980s, all five schools in Joyo City had a school uniform rule, requiring that male students wear a military style uniform and female students wear a sailor suit. By 1998, three of the five schools changed their uniform to a blazer, while two schools maintained their previous rule. Teachers and school officials told me that the possibility of changing school uniforms was discussed at all five schools. As I will elaborate, what was influential was not the presence or absence of demands calling for change, but local interpretations of students' violations of rules and of community culture.

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[21] Traditional school uniforms imply a military style uniform for boys and a sailor suit for girls.

The uniform rule of the schools in Nara City adds another feature. Nara City has nineteen junior high schools. Three schools established in the 1970s started without school uniforms.[22] In the early 1980s, the other sixteen schools had a uniform policy identical to the five schools in Joyo City. By 1998, five schools in Nara City eliminated school uniforms, three schools changed from a military style uniform to a blazer, while eight schools maintained their original rule. The following table summarizes changes in school uniforms in Nara City.

Table 3. School Uniforms in Nara City in the 1980s and in 1998

	Traditional	Blazer	No Prescribed Dress
1980s	16 schools	0 schools	3 schools
1998	8 schools	3 schools	8 schools

How did such variations in uniforms emerge in Joyo and Nara? These local variations cannot be explained if we focus only on the supervisory power of the Ministry of Education. Analyzing interviews and written documents, I found that educators' interpretations of students' rule violations, community culture, and alternatives to traditional school uniforms significantly influenced each school's decision about uniforms.[23]

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[22] The three schools without standardized uniform since their opening are Heijo Junior High, Heijo Nishi Junior High, and Nimyō Junior High. All three opened in the mid-1970s in areas where new housing communities were developed. In these expanding communities, many families with junior high school students settled into new houses. In order to curtail the cost incurred by these families to buy new uniforms, the schools permitted students to wear regular clothes (*Asahi Shinbun* 7/5/1999).

[23] Herbert Blumer defines "interpretation" as "a formative process in which meanings are used and revised as instruments for the guidance and formation of action," in Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969), p. 5. Following Blumer, in this paper, I use the term as an indicator of ways in which the school uniforms were supported or criticized in association with a given condition, which resulted in the decision to change or not.

Interpretations of Rule Violations

Rules change not when students conform to them, but when teachers cannot sufficiently instruct students to follow them. Students' violations present an opportunity for teachers to consider whether the rules in question are essential for school life and student socialization or can be altered.[24]

Schools may be more likely to lessen their control when they interpret rule violations as interfering with the achievement of other institutional goals. An important point is that the decision to deregulate may not correlate with the frequency or severity of rule violations. How rule violations are interpreted appears to be more important than the number or the content of violations. In Joyo City, I found three interpretations of rule violations that have differentiated paths and outcomes of school uniform changes. The first type of interpretation is found at Kita Joyo Junior High School, where a sweeping change in rules, including school uniforms, was made in 1987. When students violated rules and the teachers attempted to enforce them, this led to violent encounters. School officials claimed that rules could not be enforced and were counterproductive in the sense that efforts to enforce rules compromised pedagogical purposes.

The second type of interpretation can be found at Minami Joyo Junior High School, where the school uniform did not change. I found that teachers and administrators claimed that they should not change rules just because they were difficult to enforce. The last type of interpretation of rule violations by students was expressed by educators at Nishi and Higashi Joyo Junior High Schools. They viewed rule violations as consistent features of school life, and thus did not interpret violations as a compelling reason to change rules. Interestingly, they did not strongly oppose rule changes, either. At these two schools, gradual changes occurred starting with rules of lesser importance and culminating with modifications of school uniforms. Some had no urgency to change, like Kita Joyo, while others had a strong opposition, such as Minami Joyo. However, both schools took gradual steps to alter their uniform.

Violations Interpreted as a Justification of Rule Changes

Kita Joyo Junior High School was motivated to reduce the strictness of rules in 1987 after teachers and administrators faced rule

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[24] A junior high school teacher in Joyo City, Interview 6/12/1999.

violations and student violence. Major changes included policies on hairstyles, socks, school bags, caps, and regulations on students' entry into entertainment places such as movie theaters. Hairstyle guidelines were changed from "for boys, length not touching eyebrows in front, ears on the side, collars in the back, and for girls, not touching eyes in front, shoulders on the side" to "hairstyles appropriate for junior high students." Bags and caps prescribed by the school as well as the rule that required students to be accompanied by parents or chaperons when they went to movie theaters, coffee shops, and malls, were eliminated. The school also changed the style of uniforms from a military style to a blazer. The adoption of a blazer was an innovative decision at the time, and Kita Joyo's decision was reported in the national and local newspapers.[25]

Demands for change at Kita Joyo were raised at a teacher meeting in 1984. In 1983, the school experienced a wave of student violence, and students' nonconformity to school rules was prevalent. A teacher at Kita Joyo in the early 1980s recalls, "When the school was faced with many violations by students, teachers started wondering whether we were struggling about something that had little to do with the purpose of education."[26] In May 1983, a student who was improperly wearing the school uniform assaulted a teacher who instructed him to correct the violation. Such an incident was interpreted as an indication that the detailed rules were counterproductive. Nomoto Katsunobu, the principal of the school at the time, commented in an interview in *Mainichi Shinbun*, "Schools supervised so many aspects of students' lives. By reducing school rules, we intended to return some of the tasks to families and redirect our energies to teaching."[27] The rules were criticized at Kita Joyo as a hindrance that kept teachers from putting more time and energy into pedagogical responsibilities. In 1985, the school formed a committee to examine the rules. It consisted of nine members, including the principal, the vice-principal, chairs of the faculty committees, and head teachers from each grade. The committee assessed the necessity of each existing rule and

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[25] Its innovativeness was reported in national newspapers such as *Asahi Shinbun* (2/6/1987) and *Mainichi Shinbun* (2/1/1987), as well as local newspapers such as *Kyoto Shinbun* (1/30/1987) and *Jonan Shinpou* (1/24/1987).

[26] Interview 6/3/1998.

[27] *Mainichi Shinbun* (2/16/1987).

drew a blueprint for changes. In December 1986, the principal announced the new rules that went into effect in April 1987.

This interpretation of rule violations as counterproductive for educational goals is also advanced at Kasuga Junior High School in Nara City, which is one of the schools that eliminated uniforms in the 1990s. The principal of Kasuga commented on why he supported the elimination of school uniforms:

> If there is a uniform, some students will somehow violate the rule. So, we have to instruct or scold them from the first thing in the morning. That doesn't make either me or the students feel better. Also, from my experience, the more we instructed them to follow rules, the more the students violated them. I just didn't see any benefits to the use of a uniform and I supported its elimination.[28]

School uniform changes were supported by teachers and school administrators when they faced many rule violations. They interpreted student violations as a hindrance to their attempt to achieve pedagogical and student guidance goals. It is important to note that the decisive point was not the presence of rule violations, but how teachers and school administrators interpreted them. The case of Minami Joyo Junior High School, which experienced a comparable extent of rule disobedience but did not change uniforms, illuminates this point.

Interpretation of Violations as Temporary

At Kita Joyo, teachers and school officials questioned the benefits of school rules when students violated them frequently. On the other hand, at Minami Joyo Junior High School, infringement of these rules by students was interpreted as a short-term trend, and some powerful teachers and officials argued that they should not compromise regulations because of the difficulty in enforcing them. Like Kita Joyo, Minami Joyo Junior High also changed many school rules. They formed a revision committee in 1986 and examined the appropriateness of existing rules. Guidelines on caps (1986), hairstyles (1987), school bags (1987), and winter coats (1988) were revised subsequently to allow for more student discretion. In 1989, following the uniform change made by Kita Joyo in 1987, a suggestion was made at the

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[28] Interview 6/9/1999.

Joyo City junior high school student guidance conference for all five schools to change the uniform to a blazer.[29] The conference concluded with the understanding that each school would consider the possibility based on the desires of students and parents, as well as the general community.

        Minami Joyo was experiencing violations of the school uniform rule, similar to other junior high schools in the city.[30] Students altered the length of uniforms, used buttons in prohibited colors such as red and blue, and embroidered some designs including dragons. Teachers attempted to guide students toward correcting the infraction but were not successful. However, their responses to the violations were different from that of Kita Joyo. The changes were not supported by the school principal, the student guidance committee members, and older teachers, who insisted that rules should not be changed merely because they are difficult to enforce.[31] A city

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[29] Information was provided in an interview (05/25/1999) by the section chief at the city board of education in Joyo City.

[30] This information was presented by several teachers in Joyo City in interviews. Although there is no specific record of the numbers of student violations, the record of the heads of student guidance section committees meeting from all five junior high schools at the City Hall in May 1989 reports the similarity in the patterns of student violations across schools.

[31] The system of seniority is often pointed out as a distinctive characteristic of Japanese organizations.   See Edwin O. Reischauer, *The Japanese* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981); Ezra F. Vogel, *Japan as Number One: Lessons for America* (NewYork: Harper Colophon Books, 1979); and Ken Schoolland, *Shogun's Ghost: The Darkside of Japanese Education* (Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, 1990). Thomas P. Rohlen reports that the seniority is significant in every facet of school structure and procedure, including curriculum development, salary structures, and decision-making in the teacher meetings, in Rohlen, *Japan's High Schools* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983), pp. 172, 175-176. Senior teachers are more powerful in decision-making processes in school structure, partly because they are more likely to hold a position in the faculty committee, especially the head position; in Nakane, *Gakko no jitsujō*. Okano and Tsuchiya point out the importance of seniority apart from the power positions in the committee. Senior teachers are called *jōseki*, literally meaning "the upper seat," in *Education in Contemporary Japan*, p. 187. Even if they do not occupy positions in the committees, their

board member who observed the consideration of changes at Minami Joyo during the 1980s told me:

> The argument was that rule violation by students was just a short-term trend and would soon decrease. Moreover, it was argued that children want to test their limits against authority, so they decided to keep the uniform in order for them to have something to test.[32]

At Minami Joyo, powerful teachers and school officials defined rule violations as a temporary condition, and argued that rules should not be loosened merely because they are difficult to enforce. It was significant that teachers who favored uniform changes were criticized by powerful teachers. A student guidance teacher at Minami Joyo in the 1980s comments:

> Teachers who are confident in student guidance do not rely on rules. They rely on what they believe is right and appropriate, and take time to logically convince kids of the need to act in a certain manner. Other teachers who don't have confidence in their ability to guide students rely on rules. Their favorite phrase is "you have to do so because it is a rule." The latter type of teacher is the one who wants to maintain rules, but when students' violations become pervasive, they want to eliminate those very rules.[33]

This comment suggests that some teachers who proposed rule changes were criticized as less competent in guiding students. In such an environment, it becomes more difficult for teachers to call for adjustments. The school uniform change became unfeasible when the claim supporting change was interpreted as a sign of incompetence at Minami Joyo Junior High School.

Interpretation of Violations as Consistent: The Lack of Urgency to Change
While studying school uniform changes in Joyo City, I also found

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voices have significant influence on the discussions at teachers' meetings and are respected by administrators and committee members; see Beauchamp, *Japanese and U.S. Education*.

[32] Interview 5/25/1999.

[33] Interview 6/12/1999.

that two other schools made modifications from the traditional military style to a blazer, comparable to Kita Joyo Junior High School. Whereas Kita Joyo's changes were led by school officials who revised most rules at the same time, these two schools made gradual transformations by starting with minor rules regarding shoes and socks and culminating in changes in school uniforms.[34] Rule violations were interpreted at these schools differently, which distinguished the paths they took toward making changes.

When violations are not interpreted as a problem that requires urgent rectification, debates on rule changes may take longer and outcomes may be reached gradually. A teacher at Nishi Joyo in the late 1980s recalls:

> Violations of the school uniform rule occurred, but that has been the case since the late 1970s. There have not been any remarkable changes in violations.[35]

A former teacher at Higashi Joyo told me that student violations of the uniform rule were prevalent at his school in the mid-1980s, but did not escalate into violent encounters.[36] Violations of the school uniform rule by students occurred at Higashi and Nishi Joyo Junior High Schools, but teachers and administrators did not interpret them with the same sense of urgency that became prominent in the case of Kita Joyo. At the same time, this interpretation does not explicitly oppose rule changes, in contrast to the educators' view at Minami Joyo that rules should not be changed just because they are difficult to enforce. Without a pressing need for revision or a strong opposition to change, schools revised rules gradually.

In this section, I discussed three interpretations of rule violations manifested at schools in Joyo City.[37] I found that the interpretations of local

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[34] At Higashi Joyo, the rule on school caps was eliminated in 1985, followed by a nametag rule in 1986, rules on hairstyles and accessories in 1987, and the rule on school bags in 1988. The school uniform was switched to a blazer in 1992. At Nishi Joyo, though in a different order, the rules were also revised gradually, starting from school bags in 1982, school caps in 1987, winter coats in 1988, and school uniforms in 1991.

[35] Interview 6/2/1998.

[36] Interview 5/25/1999.

[37] It should not be thought that each interpretation of rule violations were held and supported by all teachers and school administrators at the school.

educators regarding rule violations by students influenced the uniform changes made by particular schools. When rule violations by students were interpreted as a hindrance for attaining pedagogical purposes, schools were more likely to change rules. On the other hand, schools were likely to keep rules unchanged when rule violations were viewed as a short-term trend and teachers who made claims were labeled as incompetents looking for an easy way out. I also found that when rule violations were defined as consistent features of school lives, neither opposition nor support for sweeping immediate changes became prevalent and rule changes including school uniforms did take place gradually.

Influences of Community Culture

It is easy to overlook how local community culture is taken into consideration for educational decision-making in Japan, whose educational system is characterized by a nationally standardized curriculum and a rigidly structured hierarchy under the Ministry of Education.[38] The Ministry of Education legitimated reassessments and revisions of school rules in April 1988, and the 1991 nationwide survey indicates that most schools deregulated their tight control over students' appearance and deportment. However, studying changes in school uniforms in Joyo and Nara City, I found two ways that the local community influenced the emergence of variations in school uniform changes.

First, educators pointed out that the profile of the local community was a significant indicator of the school's decision to change uniforms. In

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As Ralph H. Turner and Lewis M. Killian warn, decisions to act collectively, in this case to change or not to change school uniforms, leads us to "the illusion of unanimity" among participants, in Turner and Killian, *Collective Behavior*, vol. 3 (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall Inc., 1987), p. 28. My analysis of data does not allow any conclusive arguments on whether the decision was unanimous or not. However, it points to which interpretation became dominant in each school, as recalled by those who observed the debates directly.   The significance attributed to these interpretive variations is limited in this paper to their influences on each school's decision about uniforms.

[38]Beauchamp, *Japanese and U.S. Education*; Okano and Tsuchiya, *Education in Contemporary Japan*; Schoolland, *Shogun's Ghost*; Rohlen, *Japan's High Schools*; and White, *The Japanese Educational Challenge*.

some communities there were people who resided in the areas for generations and did not make demands for rule changes. On the other hand, in communities with many new residents, people tended to express views that were against traditional regulations by schools.

Second, educators' views about the local community affected their willingness to change school uniforms. In such cases, it is not the actual profile of the local community, but the views held among educators about the profile that had a significant impact. Although this may be a small part of a much larger trend guided by Japanese national culture and the Ministry's legitimation, it helps identify significant differences in schools influenced by local community culture.

Profiles of Local Community

Tomio Junior High School is one of eight schools that still use traditional school uniforms in Nara City. When I asked the school's principal why they had not changed uniforms, he told me that no requests had been made for uniform changes. He attributed the absence of requests to the lack of residential movement in the school area. The principal states, "Our students are from families who have lived in this area for generations. People don't expect change, so no one asks for it."[39] A former teacher at Mikasa Junior High, which pioneered uniform elimination in the city, commented on the other side of the story:

> In the district of Mikasa Junior High, families settle because their company transferred them here. So, until the company decides to transfer them, other people will continue to move in. I saw a tendency that people who transfer in express more radical ideas.[40]

These comments suggest that when residential mobility of local communities was high, demands for changes were more likely to be made. Schools located in communities with less movement of residents may have been less likely to receive requests for change. Although studies of schools in Japan tend to focus on the uniformity and centralization of the system, the potential for school rule changes, at least in some cases, has been affected by characteristics of the local communities.

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[39] Interview 6/16/1999.
[40] Interview 6/23/1999.

Educators' Views on Community Culture

In Nara City, educators emphasized community differences when explaining attitudes of local residents toward school uniforms. I also found that views of teachers and school officials about their local communities affected their decisions to change school uniforms. Schools appear more likely to have lessened their control when they perceived that community members would support their decisions. How they view the prevailing culture of people in the community was perhaps as important as the objective conditions of the community itself.

An example of how community culture was interpreted in relation to school uniforms is Minami Joyo Junior High School, which retained its traditional military style uniform. Some teachers and school officials at Minami Joyo told me that the view expressed at the teachers meeting was that the local community would not accept the change. A current assistant principal states:

> Families around here have lived their entire lives in this region. This is primarily an agricultural region in the city. So, people tend to be conservative. [41]

A student guidance teacher at Minami Joyo from 1979 to 1990 recalls that:

> There was a debate on the possibility of uniform change. The suggestion was made by some teachers after Kita Joyo changed its uniform to a blazer. But we decided not to change partly because we couldn't imagine that the parents and people in the community would support the change. [42]

Whether the community in Minami Joyo's school district was more conservative, or not, was less important than the fact that teachers had such a view about the community, which influenced decision-making at the school. A city board member told me that Minami Joyo and Nishi Joyo Junior High Schools had a comparable number of students whose families engage in agriculture. The other three schools in Joyo City had students

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[41] Interview 6/3/1998.
[42] Interview 6/12/1999.

with such backgrounds.[43]   It is important to note that while Nishi Joyo changed its school uniform, Minami Joyo did not.   This suggests how teachers and school officials perceived the school community and may have diversified the schools' decisions, irrespective of its profile.

Interpretations of Feasibility
          The feasibility of the elimination of school uniforms as perceived by teachers and school officials also influenced their decisions. Feasibility is defined as "a vague impression about the possibilities inherent in a situation, the facilities or resources needed for carrying out the action, and the ability of the potential actors to carry out the action successfully."[44] It signifies the actors' calculation of the cultural appropriateness of a decision they are to make and the likelihood of its successful implementation. Educators interpreted proposed changes in rules with reference to what they regarded as feasible at the time claims were made. Some variations resulted when alternatives that seemed unfeasible became accepted at a later time.
          The decision to change a traditional military style uniform to a blazer by Tonan Junior High School in Nara City in April 1991 illustrates that the elimination of uniforms was interpreted as impractical. The debate about the change started in 1988, when some teachers voiced their disappointment in the ineffectiveness of their trying to guide students to conform to the school uniform rule.[45] A student guidance committee suggested that the school uniform be eliminated, but students and parents opposed the idea. A former student guidance teacher recalls:

> Because no other school in Nara City had eliminated the school
> uniform at the time, we were very apprehensive about how the
> community would respond. So we conducted surveys of parents
> and students.   It turned out that 60% of students and 80% of
> parents were opposed to the idea of allowing students to choose
> their own attire. The idea of a blazer came up as a compromise.[46]

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[43] Interview 5/25/1999.
[44] Turner and Killian, *Collective Behavior*, p. 9.
[45] Factual information on Tonan Junior High School's uniform change is from interviews of a current and a former student guidance teacher at Tonan during the late 1980s and the early 1990s.
[46] Interview 6/17/1999.

This points to the importance of the timing of claims against a social condition. The elimination of school uniforms was not supported at the time the claim was made at Tonan Junior High School. On the contrary, when surveys were taken at Kasuga Junior High School in 1995, only 15% of students and 29% of parents opposed the elimination of school uniforms. Kasuga eliminated its uniform in 1997.

The principal at Kasuga Junior High and current chair of the city's public school student guidance committee points out an ironic development:

> Schools that switched from a traditional uniform to a blazer early on have not eliminated the blazer. The pattern of uniform changes after Mikasa Junior High School [which set the precedent of change from a traditional school uniform to no rule on student clothes] has been the elimination of rules, and all of the schools that have eliminated regulations never adopted a blazer.[47]

Schools that experienced earlier demands from significant segments of the school organization changed from a traditional military style to a blazer. The elimination of the school uniform was not feasible at the time, and students and the community did not support the idea. Once changed, the argument to eliminate the blazer had not gained momentum at Tonan Junior High School. It is interesting that schools that reassessed and revised rules in ways that reflected the changing lifestyles of youth can now be defined as permitting less individualistic expression, while schools that retained traditional uniforms longer and then eliminated them can be seen as respecting individuality more. Variations in uniforms in Nara City may indicate that school rule changes were influenced by what was perceived as feasible alternatives at the time of discussion and decisions about changes. Once changes have been made, it is apparently less likely that schools will make another revision even though further deregulations were recently made in nearby local settings.

Another interpretation of feasibility is found in Joyo City. There, a school decided not to make changes based on an interpretation about what could be feasible in the near future. At Joyo Junior High School, changing to a blazer was passed up when teachers and school officials claimed that

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[47] Interview 6/9/1999.

switching to a blazer was a short-term trend and the elimination of school uniforms would soon become a possibility.

Joyo Junior High had gone through school rule revisions in the late 1980s. In 1986, rules on school caps were eliminated, followed by the removal of rules on school bags in 1988. In 1990, the school considered the possibility of a uniform change because traditional uniforms did not reflect clothes commonly worn in Japan, and other schools in the area switched or were considering switching to a blazer.[48] At the teachers meeting, the issue was discussed and dismissed. A teacher at Joyo Junior High from 1990 to 1995 recalls how the discussion ended:

> When the issue of school uniforms was brought up at the teachers' meeting, change was passed up due to the view that the blazer was a temporary condition at public schools in Japan. The blazer was considered a compromise between the traditional uniform and private clothes, and the elimination of standardized clothes would be the major trend. So, we should not change twice, but wait until the trend starts and make the change then.[49]

At Joyo Junior High School, claims for the adoption of a blazer were deferred until the elimination of school uniforms became a national trend. As of 1999, Joyo Junior High School still used a traditional school uniform. Teachers and administrators decided to continue to use traditional school uniforms not because they did not agree with the view that school uniforms were culturally obsolete, but based on their prediction that the blazers would also be outdated in the near future. Local educators at Joyo Junior High suspended changes and maintained the status quo since they believed that continuing influences of cultural changes would soon supersede any presently feasible adjustments.

Implications for Future Research on Japanese Schools

The Japanese educational system has been characterized by centralization and standardization. Resonating with this traditional understanding, recent school rule changes were attributed to the Ministry of Education's instruction to revise rules issued in April 1988. While

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[48] Interview 6/11/1998.
[49] Interview 6/12/1999.

nationwide changes after April 1988 indicate the supervisory power of the Ministry, this paper posed a question of whether anything significant in school rule changes in Japan is neglected if one focuses on national and global forces of change. In the spirit of Herbert Blumer, I conducted fieldwork by looking for variations in school rule changes that cannot be explained in terms of top-down intervention by the Ministry of Education.

I documented the presence of local variations in school uniforms and attempted to better understand how such variations emerged. I found that educators' interpretations of rule violations, community culture, and feasible options on changes influenced decisions on school uniforms. First, student violations of school rules was an important condition in the sense that it provided an occasion for teachers and administrators to assess the necessity and appropriateness of violated rules and to consider the possibility of change. It is important to note that the potential effects of student violations on requests cannot be simply understood by the increase or decrease of violations. How student violations are interpreted at each school setting, especially by educators in positions of power, influences the possibility for rule revisions.

Secondly, community culture also influences the processes of decision-making on the school rule issue. In a community where the local residents have lived in the area for generations, they are less likely to make significant demands for changes in school rules. Also, the community culture can exert an influence, as in the case of Minami Joyo Junior High, where schoolteachers and administrators passed up the possibility of change based on the assumption that the community would not support rule change.

Third, the repertoire of feasible changes when claims were made contributed to the variations in uniforms. Tonan Junior High in Nara City reassessed its rules earlier than others in the district, and its school uniform changed from the unpopular traditional type to a popular blazer. But after Tonan's change, the elimination of school uniforms rather than switching uniforms from one type to another became feasible. Other schools that reassessed and changed rules a few years later eliminated school uniforms altogether.

Another mechanism for variation resulting from educators' views on feasible options was found in Joyo City. Joyo Junior High did not change its school uniform, even though there was openness for change while three other schools in the city varied in the late 1980s based on an anticipation of the increasing feasibility of uniform elimination in the near future. This points to the importance of how educators at each school

assess not only what options are available, but also what options are likely to become feasible when making their decisions about uniform changes.

Nationally legitimized rule changes were not always incorporated automatically into each school practice, but educators assessed and negotiated in reference to some conditions specific to each school community before making decisions about changes. Though these may be small variations in a large trend toward school rule deregulation, attention to local interpretations will lead us to a better understanding of some overlooked aspects of school rule changes. As a conclusion to this paper, I will point to two implications of this analysis for future research on Japanese schools.

First, further studies on Japanese school rule changes can be developed by building upon the findings in this study. Did educators' interpretations of rule violations, community culture, and the feasibility of alternative uniforms come into play in a similar manner at schools in other areas in Japan? Or did they matter differently in other schools? Were there any other conditions that came into play during the school rule debates that were not identified in this study? Further comparative studies will help us understand more about the effects of local conditions and interpretations on school rule changes, providing an opportunity to theorize relationships that connect rule changes, local conditions, and educators' interpretations.

Second, it would be beneficial to examine other aspects of education, such as a curriculum, school organizational structures, teachers' roles, and exams and credentials from Blumerian perspectives. Do local interpretations matter in other aspects of education, or are they only applicable to a small part of school rule changes? If they do matter, how do they come into play in cases of curriculum implementation in a nationally standardized system? Generally, I argue that it is more enriching to examine Japanese schools in terms of both macro (national and global forces) and micro (local contingencies) levels. Our understanding of Japanese education will be more refined and sophisticated by analyzing not only the decisive influences of the Ministry of Education and structural and cultural conditions in increasingly globalized Japan, but also local educators' assessment of their schools and communities which may differentiate eventual educational decisions.