Dear JD,

Have you adjusted to your new school yet? I ask this knowing that your answer is going to be no, that a month has passed since you entered Tosei high school in the April of 2015 and you feel more alienated than ever before, and that the sudden change in environment is forcing you to realize the important role that social factors play in the shaping of one’s life. You might ask how I know all of this. It is because I am you, writing to you from the future. However, this does not mean that I am the same person as your 14-year-old self, waiting to turn 15 in May. A large portion of a person’s character is defined as an amalgam of their surrounding sociological conditions, social experiences and other extraneous factors. I am speaking to you as a product of my environment and my past choices which have helped shaped my environment, and as such I want to share a few words of encouragement and guidance concerning you and your relationship to society. You are at a time in life where it is becoming increasingly clear how contingent life is, and how much your life depends on the environment you are in.

The transfer from an affluent international school following an American curriculum to an impoverished Japanese high school that you have just undergone was devastating and forced you to acknowledge the importance of social environment on your life. Now that you have left the wealthy environment of the international school, you are finally able to see the many privileges that money can buy, and that you used to possess yourself (and still do to a certain degree). Perhaps the biggest difference between the two schools which you are struggling to accept right now is the quality of the students. In your former school, all the students were ambitious, goal oriented and studious, taking extra-curricular lessons and undergoing shadow education. The students from your current high school, on the other hand, lack in any ambition or morale, are incapable of organized self-governance, and perform terribly academically. As hard as it may be to accept this, this is not indicative of any qualitative difference between the nature of the students or their personal effort. It is a clear sign of a difference in social environment, and you must learn to accept that the only thing that differentiates you from the underachieving students who surround you are the social factors in your life.

To make the effects of social factors on your life clear, it is important to first establish an objective account of yourself. You come from a relatively wealthy family; not excessively rich but never in need. One of the most important aspects of your family life is the abundance of cultural capital. Cultural capital can be defined as immaterial wealth in the form of knowledge and behavioral tendencies that are advantageous to have within society. As you know, your mother is from a wealthy family and is well versed in Japanese manners and decorum. She is also a very organized person with bourgeois values, passionate about education and encouraging of delayed satisfaction (to postpone short term satisfaction for greater future rewards). All of these values which have been instilled in you from an early age have put you in an advantaged position, facilitating your acceptance into society and causing others to view you with respect. An organized study habit engrained in your daily routine by your parents has helped you enhance your academic ability, and the fact that both your parents are university graduates has familiarized the idea of higher education and caused you to aspire for higher education yourself. Your unique background as a bilingual has given you a considerable advantage in academics. You need to realize that all of these factors, though you may not always be conscious of them, are implicitly in effect, shaping your abilities, behavior, your reception into society and much more. What you currently believe to be a result of your hard work or other factors tracing back to you as an individual are inaccurate to say the least, and an understanding of the social factors governing your life is essential in finding peace in your present time of turmoil.

(The following is a combination of segments 1 and 2)

Now let me take a minute to discuss myself, my educational history, and how I’ve found myself in the place I am right now. I am currently attending Waseda university’s school of political science and economics. I know that to you this may sound crazy and implausible, but it’s true. You must be aware that your high school is an academically underachieving school, and that a graduate of that school getting into a university as reputable as Waseda is virtually inconceivable. In my case, I had considerable help from my family background and other social conditions which enabled me to pursue high educational attainment.

First of all, the international school that I attended up until middle school that you have just left, was a predominantly upper-class school. According to Bowles’ and Gintis’ Correspondence Theory, education tailored to the upper classes present students with more freedom and opportunity, encouraging creative and independent thought and cultivating leadership skills needed for managerial positions which the upper class are prone to take. International school gave me exactly this kind of education, enabling me to think for myself and develop problem solving skills that would eventually earn me respect and lead to the formation of high educational expectations by teachers in high school.

Following this train of thought, allow me to elaborate on the significant influence that teacher expectations had on my educational choices. Teachers from my high school formed high expectations for me based on my formal oral language patterns (I spoke very context-independently, an indicator of my middle class upbringing), academic performance, readiness, and my confidence in myself (formed as a result of the bourgeois education I received in international school) and ability to clearly pronounce my beliefs and back them up with logical thinking. Teachers almost felt intimidated by my capacity for reasoning and fearlessness when it came to confronting others and fighting for my beliefs, and this led to them altering their perception of me and viewing me as “intelligent.” This, paired with my high performance in academics, raised the expectations that teachers had for me and my educational attainment, and they vocalized these expectations and encouraged me to aim for high goals. I, much like you now, used to not believe in myself, and especially after the transfer I started to equate my academic level with the level of the students around me and began to be much more skeptical of my own abilities. It was these teacher expectations which first made me realize that I had the potential to grow and attain high education, and without these expectations I wouldn’t have even thought of applying for Waseda.

The teachers’ high expectations for my academic performance induced them to create anew a track for high-achieving students aspiring to get into high level schools. Teachers created extra classes and courses for a handful of selected children with high academic performance to teach them advanced material not covered in class. I was the first student they picked up for this program, and this track materialized the high educational expectations that teachers had for me and created an environment where I was in no shortage of help and assistance in my studies and which reinforced the prospect of me moving on to a high-ranking university in my head.

Other factors that influenced me on an individual level were the students I attended school with at international school. These children were very ambitious and competitive in the race for college admissions, and while I was there, I absorbed their attitude and learned to compare myself with others and aspire for high level schools. This was always in the corner of my mind even after I switched schools and induced me to work hard to improve my educational attainment.

On an aggregate level, the school culture of my international school, that is protestant values of material success and delayed satisfaction, rubbed off on me and developed a goal oriented and driven work ethic in me. Now that I am in college, I find I am being influenced by aggregational standards once again. My department has a culture of encouraging students to study abroad, and I am tempted to study abroad as a result of this culture.

What I mentioned above, namely the correspondence of my wealth and education within schools, teachers’ educational expectations and tracking and ability-based grouping are just a few of the many sociological conditions affecting my educational history and resulted in me majoring in political science and economics at Waseda university. Right now, as I am surrounded by some of the brightest, highest achieving, and by far some of the most environmentally blessed youth in Japan, I see myself pursuing education further and moving on to graduate school. This was unimaginable for me before, but now any other path seems like an impossibility.

I know that you are in a time of great turmoil, despairing in the utter meaninglessness of individual effort in the face of grave environmental and social disadvantages. The only thing I can say right now is, you are right to feel that way, but you must not give up and must persist in fighting the system.