

Can the Japanese Change Their Education System? Roger Goodman and David Phillips, eds. *Oxford Studies in Comparative Education*, 12(1). David Phillips, ed. United Kingdom: Symposium Books, 2003. 182pp.

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After more than a decade of recession in Japan, few institutions have escaped incessant calls for reform. The education system in particular has faced intense scrutiny, with national debate addressing tertiary education management practices, relaxation of compulsory education, and prioritization of science and technology to advance economic growth and global competitiveness. International discussion of Japan's education system has shifted 180 degrees since the 1980s, when few outside Japan dared question its worldwide pre-eminence. As then, the perceived link to economic growth remains strong, but while seen as fundamental to Japan's success in the 1970s and 1980s, the education system is viewed by many today as the root of current socioeconomic malaise. Exacerbated by media portrayals of an educational "crisis" linked to broader social ills, progress in implementing change seems painstakingly slow. Accordingly, debate in 2003 has progressed beyond whether educational reform is required or even beneficial, centering instead on whether implementation of announced reforms can overcome overwhelming countervailing forces and ultimately lead to any meaningful change.

This anthology grew out of an Oxford seminar series on then-impending April 2002 revisions of the compulsory curriculum. Nine chapters examine diverse topics, including multidisciplinary perspectives, such as post-war reforms in Germany and Japan, long-range reforms since the 1980s, revisions in compulsory school education, English language teaching and mathematics, and the impact of globalization on higher education. A word of warning: readers searching for a definitive answer to the question posed by the book's title will be disappointed. As is readily apparent from the above topics, the task of integrating these diverse chapters is daunting, and the title provides only a broad heuristic.

Goodman's introductory chapter acknowledges the volume's diversity and draws out commonalities examining the process, basis, and outcome of educational reform in Japan, concluding that a widening gap between public and private education will result in a shift from the former unitary model to a range of educational experiences (and outcomes) across different groups of children. He also addresses four familiar themes in discussions of Japanese education--individuality, creativity, internationalism, and liberalization--arguing that careful examination reveals discrepancies in connotations and motivations



for using these equivocal terms, and debunks what some view as a homogenization of reform processes in Japan and the West.

Supporting this argument, Aspinall reasons that successful English language reforms must address varying Japanese nationalist perspectives, including the equivocal "healthy (inter)nationalism" espoused by former Prime Minister Nakasone, a figure generally viewed as an internationalist outside of Japan and a nationalist within. Hood, on the other hand, presents Nakasone's internationalization efforts as exemplifying a broad slate of 1980s initiatives currently being realized in a "third great wave of educational reform" following the Meiji and immediate post-war reforms. Arguing that accurate evaluation of reform must take a long-term approach, Hood claims that Nakasone's internationalization legacy continues to unfold today in the form of the JET Program, for example, which according to Hood has improved students' and teachers' English skills. Though some may disagree with his conclusions, the framework taken by Hood in defining reform and outlining the scope of analysis adds clarity to his evaluation that would have benefited the anthology as a whole.

Cummings also takes a long-term perspective, discussing educational reforms within the context of societal "mega-trends" of urbanization, demographic change, supply and demand shifts in higher education, and youth unemployment. Given these fluctuations, traditional motivations for study lose relevance, requiring a new environment that motivates students to learn for the sake of learning itself. However, the suggestion that shifting conditions will ultimately provide children with a "secure future" seems less convincing. While population decline and overabundance of universities may indeed produce "virtually universal tertiary education" (p. 37), oversupply does not suggest that students and employers will find individual universities equally appealing, obviating pressure to compete for entrance to those deemed most desirable.

Readers may wonder why mathematics would appear in a volume on Japanese educational reform, as Japanese students continue to excel in international rankings. However, as Whitburn relates, broad compulsory curricular reform allocating time to other subjects has drastically reduced time spent on mathematics. Exacerbating the sense of crisis, recent surveys suggest that while Japanese students perform admirably by international standards, they enjoy it less. Yet Whitburn concludes that a rationalization of the curriculum eliminating redundancies but maintaining core concepts will mitigate the negative impact of lost contact hours.

Cave applies a critical lens to national government rhetoric, examining local implementation of four recent reforms: curricular revisions, five-day school week, promotion of integrated six-year secondary schools, and school choice. For example, the new Integrated Learning course mandated by the Ministry of Education contains only minimal guidelines promoting yutori "room to grow," and ikiruchikara "zest for living" through creative, locally relevant curricula. Causing consternation throughout teaching ranks accustomed to highly prescriptive national course guidelines, implementation has



been uneven. As Cave describes, the curriculum at one university-affiliated school encompasses topics of study and project work on themes such as human rights, while in contrast, other schools apply a narrower scope to the subject or attempt to fill the time through less rigorous lessons such as foreign cuisine. Additionally, in an effort to recover time lost to the new curriculum, some schools have taken to reallocating traditional lessons into the Integrated Learning timeslot, a phenomenon I have also observed at my own field site in Kobe.

Perhaps the most convincing case for reform is provided by Tsuruta, who links recent changes in Japanese higher education to globalization and socioeconomic shifts that have led Japan to promote development of basic technology as one means to improve international competitiveness. Of course, these reforms, which include privatization and amalgamation of national universities, concentrated competitive allocation of government funding, industry-university cooperation, and third-party program evaluation all create tremendous challenges for specific universities, and Tsuruta concludes that private, provincial, and liberal arts colleges are likely to suffer most from dwindling student populations.

Though some chapters are clearly positioned, the loose rubric under which they are assembled makes one question whether those unfamiliar with Japan and Japanese education could imagine underlying social and institutional forces obstructing progress in some areas of the educational system while simultaneously allowing reforms in other areas to proceed at a seemingly rapid pace. A summative chapter bringing together various strands pursued within the chapters would have helped in this endeavor of developing comprehensive conclusions.

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