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Ryoko Tsuneyoshi

Models of schooling in the global age: the case of Japan

Japanese education: transformation and continuity

- 1 In our globalized world, many societies are experiencing similar pressures to reform their education. Countries around the world are talking about meeting the challenges of the global era. At the same time, there are distinct legacies that set societies and regions apart from each other.
- 2 Japan is no exception, and Japanese education today is a mixture of continuity and change. In the following section, I will examine some of the pressure points.

The basic context

- 3 There are several images that emerge in the international literature on Japanese education. Elementary school education is usually praised as whole-child-oriented, as balanced academically and socially. Children attend their neighborhood schools, which strive to educate both “the heart and mind” (Lewis, 1995). Japanese teachers quite openly affirm that building a supportive classroom and developing a caring character are the basis for academic achievement, not the opposite (Lewis, 1995; Tsuneyoshi, 2001).
- 4 Elementary school and lower-secondary school are part of compulsory education, and most Japanese children go through the public system without a major entrance examination.¹ Some children, especially in the urban areas, may leave the public system (e.g. go to a private school), and there may be school choice within the public school system, but life is still relatively relaxed for most children, and this is the level at which the Japanese model of schooling seems to be strongest. There are active teachers’ research groups that extend across the nation, and teachers share lesson plans and observe each other’s lessons. Foreign observers have noted that the ideal school type in the Japanese model of schooling is the elementary school (Cummings, 1999), and this is where the ideals of the model, such as collaborative learning and whole-child education, seem strongest. The next section gives two representative examples from the Japanese model of schooling, one of which is an international model.

National models as international models

- 5 Though there has been much talk within the country about the lowering of academic achievement in the late 1990s, internationally, Japanese students, alongside students of other East Asian societies/regions, tend to be known for their high scores in international tests such as the IEA’S TIMSS and the OECD’S PISA. Countries with high scores have often been used as international models, such as “Singapore math” or the Finnish model of achievement.
- 6 One of the Japanese models of schooling that has caught international attention is what is commonly known as “lesson study”. Lesson study has a long tradition in Japan, but it was “discovered” by the international community after it was introduced in English (Stevenson and Stigler, 1992; Stigler and Hiebert, 1999). Described as a bottom-up form of collaborative teacher learning, lesson study now has supporters in various countries (e.g. World Association of Lesson Studies).
- 7 There is another model within the Japanese educational tradition that possibly has the potential to become international. Various reform proposals to educate citizens for the 21st century emphasize not only a narrow definition of academic ability, but the development of the well-balanced child. Whether it is Chinese quality education, or social and emotional learning, there is an emphasis on communication, collaboration, emotional stability, and other qualities forming the total child.
- 8 The Japanese model of schooling structures collaborative activities for children; it places such activities in the official curriculum under the banner of educating the whole child. Thus,

building a classroom community, child-initiated discussion, daily morning and afternoon meetings, school events, classroom monitors, and cleaning and serving lunch in small groups, are all part of the daily routines of children nationwide (Tsuneyoshi, 2001). Though I will not go into details here, children participate in small groups that are deliberately heterogeneous, and which engage in collaborative activities for a certain period of time. These daily activities, classroom discussions, school events, and children's councils, etc. are placed in the curriculum as "special activities" (called *tokubetsu katsudo*, *tokkatsu* for short). *Tokkatsu* has a child-initiated, hands-on "learn by doing" target goal.²

9 Since the guiding principle of the education of the whole child assumes that social, emotional, intellectual, and physical development are intertwined, it is ironic that only the part that addresses the education of the intellect (e.g. lesson study for math, mostly) has attracted international attention, while the part that targets non-intellectual capacities, such as social and emotional education, have not.

The examination hell in transition

10 If the formative years of the Japanese model of schooling are usually praised internationally, Japanese high schools tend to be portrayed as high-achieving, but exam-dominated (Rohlen, 1983). One of the most popular images of Japanese high schools is that of the examination hell. Alongside Korea, China, etc., Japan is one of the societies known for its competition in entrance examinations. Terms such as "education mamas", "examination hell", and *juku* ("cram schools") have entered the vocabulary of textbooks on Japanese education in the English language. The existence of an exam industry that thrives on offering exam-related products (e.g., mock exams, reference books, *juku*) is seen as an indication of this exam culture. Compulsory education ends at junior high school, but most students move on to high school. High schools become ranked, according to their competitiveness (Oakes, 1985; LeTendre *et al.*, 2003).

11 For a long time, the image of secondary school students inside Japan, especially portrayed by the media, was consistent with the above-stated image abroad. Thus, for decades, the Japanese national debate had been focused on how to decrease the educational competition, not the opposite. It was assumed that the pendulum had gone too far, and that something had to be done to alleviate the severe competition.

12 From the end of the 1990s, however, before the 2002 national curriculum standards were implemented, there erupted a "lowering of achievement" debate, as some critics started to maintain that the academic level of students was going down, that surveys were showing that Japanese high-school students were studying less than their counterparts in other countries, and that passing the entrance examination was no longer a major factor of motivation to study. The efforts to "relax" Japanese education from around the 1970s, with the dropping of content, etc., were accused of watering down the curriculum (Ichikawa, 2002; Tsuneyoshi, 2004). The basics were reemphasized.

13 Today, however, with reduced student pressure in higher education as a whole, and the diversification of routes into higher education, etc., critics have started to talk about loosening the pressure of the entrance examination for all but those striving to attend the most competitive universities. At the same time, in central urban districts with an affluent population, there is also a lowering of entrance examination competition, as parents compete to place their children in private junior high schools (Tsuneyoshi, 2013). Thus, the landscape is mixed. There is now much more talk than before of the gap between the haves and have-nots, of the disparity of opportunity in terms of educational equality. The era when most Japanese thought they were middle class has come to an end.

Educating for a multicultural and global world

14 Like countries around the world, Japanese education today is struggling to educate citizens for a global knowledge society. There is an emphasis on thinking, and the teacher is to take on a new role as the coordinator of discussion, rather than a direct transmitter of set knowledge. Inquiry, problem-solving, discussion, etc., are cited as desirable. In English-

language education, communicative English is favored above the traditional grammar-based teaching.

15 This general trend is true as well, even to a greater extent, in higher education, as professors are asked to abandon their conventional style of one-way lectures in favor of interactive learning. Meeting the “international” standard, whatever the area in question, is also something that is given more weight.

16 With the increase in international competition, the government has launched various globalization projects such as the Super Science High Schools and the Super Global High Schools. There is a growing discourse in the government, corporate sector, and the media, to educate “global talent” (Global Jinzai Ikusei Suishin Kaigi, 2012). At the same time, there is more talk about Japan as a multicultural society, as Japanese society diversifies (Tsuneyoshi, Okano, and Boocock, 2011). Such various discourses – neoliberal, multicultural, etc. – compete and intertwine.

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Notes

1 Only 1.1 percent of children went to private schools at the elementary school level, and 7.2 percent at the junior high school level. Other than private schools, there are some national schools and junior/senior high public schools. For college, the percentage of private institutions jumps up to over 70 percent. See: [http://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/koutou/shinkou/main5_a3.htm], accessed February 2014.

2 See: [<http://www.p.u-tokyo.ac.jp/~tsunelab/tokkatsu/>], accessed January 2014.

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Résumé

In sum, in Japan today, we see a society that shares many educational trends with the rest of the world (e.g. globalization), while maintaining distinct features of its model of schooling. Some parts of this model have been introduced internationally, while other parts of it are seen as domestic.

Entrées d'index

Keywords : curriculum, educational model, educational reform, pedagogy, educational systems

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