

BOOK REVIEW

Education in Japan: A Comprehensive Analysis of Education Reforms and Practices. By Yuto Kitamura, Toshiyuki Omono, Masaaki Katsuno (Eds.) (2019), 241 pp. ISBN: 978-981-13-2630-1, Singapore: Springer.

Japan began to modernize its education system during the late 19th century by drawing upon models provided by the West but without having to experience the phenomenon of colonization. During the post-WWII period, its education system was restructured, under strong influence from the United States. Then, during the 1990s, there was further wide-ranging reform of the system. These three waves of change have enabled Japan's education system to play a vital role in Japanese society, first through its contribution to the modernization of Japanese culture during the late 19th century, then by contributing to the high-speed pace of economic growth from the late 1950s, and recently by enabling Japan to become a rich and globally advanced nation.

Japan's education system has, however, faced many challenges. In this book, Kitamura and colleagues, drawing upon original research as well as material from secondary sources, present a comprehensive portrait of these challenges, especially those experienced over recent years. Their book explores the distinctive characteristics of Japan's education system, together with critical challenges and likely developments.

Overall, it is an extraordinarily valuable resource, both for the attention it gives to particular aspects of the Japanese education system and for its comprehensive overview of the processes of change within the system.

The book is presented in two parts. Part I is about the organizational elements within the education system in Japan, and Part II about a range of issues affecting the system. Part I provides a stage-based analysis of the system: primary, secondary, higher and lifelong education, addressing basic institutional structures, significant policies, and recent reforms. Part II delves into issues concerning teachers, disciplinary structures, community engagement, equity, labor market articulation, multiculturalism, university reform, international relationships, and sustainability.

In Part I, Chapter 1 describes briefly the main changes that occurred in Japan's education systems after WWII. It explains the organization of the book. It also draws particular attention to the importance of researching early childhood education in Japan, though curiously this topic receives no further consideration in the book. Chapter 2 investigates changes in the post-WWII primary and secondary systems and identifies factors affecting the establishment of an Ad Hoc Council in Education, together with its impact on the subsequent development of the Japan's education system. Chapter 3 is concerned with higher education in Japan. It summarizes several features of this sector: the largest share of private higher education, the importance of the national university's role in undertaking academic research and in producing graduate students, and the market-oriented nature of the higher education system before the 1990s. It identifies four stages in the development of the sector: higher education in the pre-war era; higher education during the pre-war period; the growth of higher education after WWII; and the expansion and disorder associated with massification and reforms during the 1990s. Chapter 4 addresses the restructuring of social and lifelong learning, exploring characteristics of post-war social education, its reforms, and how it transitioned to become a lifelong learning system since the 1970s. These characteristics include commercialization, municipal reforms and the establishment of citizens' community centers. This chapter demonstrates the importance of having a robust civil capability. Chapter 5, outlining changes that have occurred in the Japanese educational administrative systems at both national and local levels since the 2000s, breaks the flow of the previous chapters because of its broader scope. It presents an account of changes in governmental policies at both the national and local levels,

together with an analysis of challenges arising from these changes. Perhaps this chapter would have been better placed in Part II of the book.

Part II has nine chapters. Chapter 6 analyzes various issues facing teachers in Japan, focusing mainly on their working conditions and quality. It argues that the working conditions of teachers need to be improved, that they should have more time to reflect their work and understand students from a socioeconomic perspective, and that there is a need to eliminate rigid national policies regarding the teaching profession. Chapter 7 presents the results of a national survey of elementary, junior and senior high schools. Based on the case of an elementary school, it discusses how the school's in-house lesson study system works. This chapter raises issues facing lesson study in Japan that might well have been addressed in more detail in the book. Chapter 8 reports on the main long-term changes in the education system by drawing upon teacher narratives and archival records since the early 20th century. It asserts the importance of analyzing these narratives and records as a basis for understanding what needs to be improved. Chapter 9's focus is the relationship between schools and local communities since the late 19th century, when Japan modernized its education system. The chapter argues that Japan succeeded in teaching children to have an image of Japan as an ethnically homogeneous entity, characterized by equal access to educational opportunities and the provision of a high level of social mobility propelled by school credentials. However, this success occurred at the expense of teaching children communal values and cultures unique to geographical regions within Japan, and it failed to address issues related to immigration and internationalization. Chapter 10 raises questions about educational disparities in Japanese society. It draws on empirical data to discuss how these disparities have influenced the youth labour market, especially after the March 2011 earthquakes in the Fukushima prefecture. The chapter makes several specific recommendations on how officialdom might seek to resolve these issues. Chapter 11 discusses multicultural issues in Japanese society. It distinguishes between 'oldcomers', 'newcomers' and 'those in between, or not, part of either'. It then examines in detail how localities with a concentration of foreigners have defined the meaning of 'multicultural' in a Japanese context. Chapter 12 touches on recent higher education reforms in Japan by focusing on the incorporation of national universities since 2004. Two significant challenges identified regarding national university corporations are the continuing extent of reductions since 2004 in annual operating grants and problems experienced concerning the mid-term plan and targets for these corporations. Chapter 13 outlines the historical development of the teaching and learning of English in Japan since the early 19th century. It critically reexamines the hypothesis that English instruction in Japan has been a failure. It stresses the role inclusion of English in the curriculum might play in promoting the internationalization of Japanese education. Chapter 14 suggests a framework for the implementation of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) programs in Japan. It identifies a need to provide multiple software support for existing safety education, proposing that this plan should start with traffic and then broaden in scope to take account of daily life and disasters.

Compared with previous publications concerning Japan's education system, there are three distinctive features of this book. Firstly, all but one of the contributors come from the Graduate School of Education at the University of Tokyo. The high social and academic status of both entities means that the book will be regarded as an authoritative source of information about the state of education in Japan. Secondly, the book is much more analytical than descriptive. Part I, which covers details of the system, accounts for only 58 pages, while Part II, which presents detailed analyses, accounts for 150 pages. Thirdly, the book is contemporary in its focus, providing a reliable source of detail about recent research on the topic of education in Japan.

In general, this book is a valuable resource if what you are looking for is an up-to-date, authoritative and comprehensive overview of the state of education in Japan.

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