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0521622522 - Education in Contemporary Japan: Inequality and Diversity

Kaori Okano and Motonori Tsuchiya

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EDUCATION IN CONTEMPORARY JAPAN

Inequality and Diversity

Rather than presenting 'Lessons for the West', this book offers a balanced introduction to and examination of contemporary Japanese education that considers criticisms of Japanese schooling practices made by the participants themselves. While the postwar system of schooling has provided valuable ingredients for economic success, Kaori Okano and Motonori Tsuchiya argue that these have been accompanied by unfavourable developments.

Education in Contemporary Japan examines the main developments of modern schooling in Japan, from the beginning of the Meiji era up to the present, and includes analysis of the most recent reforms. By drawing extensively on detailed ethnographic studies and interviews with students and teachers, Okano and Tsuchiya show the diversity of school experiences, and develop a new picture of the role that schooling plays for individuals and the wider society. This insightful and provocative study of the issues of social inequality and the scope for autonomy within the Japanese education system will be essential reading for students and educators alike.

KAORI OKANO is a senior lecturer in the Department of Asian Studies at La Trobe University. She is the author of *Transition from School to Work in Japan* (1993), and has also published widely in such journals as *Sociology of Education*, *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* and the *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*.

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Preface

The practice of schooling in any society exhibits a complex dynamism. In industrialised societies, schools accept children as young as five or six years of age, from diverse family backgrounds, for at least nine years of their most formative period. Modern schools involve almost all children (at least officially), and teach a set of knowledge that is deemed ‘appropriate’ to age-graded groups of children through the compulsory school years, and, later, more specialised knowledge to selected groups of students at secondary schools and beyond. Prior to the advent of modern schooling, only a small proportion of children received private formal lessons appropriate to their positions in the society, while others were educated informally at home. The introduction of modern schools therefore led to a profound reorganisation of social life, both at the individual level and for the society as a whole. The system of modern schooling continues to play a dynamic role in society and amongst individuals. This book examines the practice of such schooling in contemporary Japan, and explores the diversity in its relationships with individuals, social groups and the society as a whole, which often results in social inequality.

We hope that this book will make a small contribution to the existing knowledge of Japanese schooling in several ways. First, it will make concrete, and humanise, statistical aggregates that show nationwide tendencies, drawing on ethnographic studies and the accounts of the major participants (students and teachers). In so doing, our analysis will move between the policies and institutional *systems* and the interactive *process* of schooling in diverse settings. Second, the book will illuminate diversity and inequality in the schooling processes as experienced by the participants, who are positioned in diverse social locations, and explore the complex relationships between the process of schooling and other ongoing social processes. Third, the book will offer a balanced depiction

of Japanese schooling by discussing its negative aspects and Japanese people's criticism of their own education system, as well as its positive features. We hope that this book will also encourage further research into Japanese schooling.

Many of those studies of Japan's modern schooling that are available in the English language are concerned with the roles that schools have played in the society's modernisation and economic development. We have been informed that schooling during the Meiji modernisation and in the post-war period was particularly effective in moving the society in the directions set by the state: to create an imperial state and a modern society in the former era, and to transform the imperial state imbued with nationalism and militarism into a democratic society in the latter. It is claimed that schools effectively socialised and acculturated the young for the adult society, raised the population's literacy and numeracy, transmitted modern skills and knowledge, and conducted meritocratic selection of the nation's young talent. The popular focus on schooling's role in modernisation and economic development derives, at least partly, from the West's preoccupation with understanding the unprecedented 'success' of Japan's modernisation.

Some of the Japanese public also share this popular interpretation of schooling. The Japanese people tend to speak of, and explain, positive aspects of their own society to outsiders. The West's positive assessment of Japanese schooling has reinforced the views of some Japanese people. Such views are congruent with the traditional Confucian belief in the essentially virtuous nature of learning. This common-sense understanding is indeed appealing: schools enable individuals to acquire the knowledge and skills (often unavailable in families) they need to lead fulfilling adult lives, and, as a consequence, allow the society to maintain and promote stability, efficiency, productivity and, perhaps, democracy. The ready acceptance of such an optimistic understanding of schooling has in part been due to the economic prosperity and relative social stability that the Japanese public have enjoyed in the last four decades.

This picture is not invalid, but it is grossly incomplete. Not only does schooling perform (both by design and otherwise) roles other than those mentioned above, but what it provides means different things to different people. That is, individuals attach varying meanings to schools as institutions and to the education that they provide. Even if relatively uniform education is provided by schools, it is likely to be consumed and utilised to varying degrees and in varying ways by people located in diverse social positions. What people obtain from schools is consequently likely to vary, with some benefiting more than others. In this case, the assumption of equality of opportunity in education based on merit needs re-examination.

While the post-war system of schooling has provided valuable ingredients for economic success and social stability, as mentioned above, these have been accompanied by unfavourable developments. Examples include what critics see as the excessively competitive examinations for entry into higher schools; the uniformity that some claim stifles individual development; bullying and school refusal. Post-war schooling has maintained monocultural orientations (as distinct from multiculturalism), which assume that all students are from a single ethnic group (Japanese), and mean that state-sponsored schools cater almost exclusively for their needs. This approach has not only undervalued what 'others' might bring to school and undermined their self-esteem; it may also have helped 'mainstream' (i.e. urban middle-class) children to develop a distorted view of the world. The practice of schooling continues to reproduce, rather than eliminate, family disadvantages. Within Japan there is a pool of studies on these negative aspects, which, naturally, exhibit research orientations that are distinct from those underlying studies on Japanese schooling published in English. We will attempt to integrate these studies, which have been conducted by 'insiders' and presented for the domestic audience, in this book.

The book has three aims. First, it will illustrate the *practice* of schooling at the macroscopic level of policy and the institutional school systems, and at the microscopic level of the schooling process. Second, it will discuss what modern schooling has brought to the society and to individuals, and how individuals, social groups and the state in turn have influenced the shaping of schooling practice. Third, it will enhance our understanding of the complex relationship between the society, schooling and individuals by discussing the above from a range of sociological perspectives.

Our central questions are as follows. What has modern schooling brought to Japanese society at large, and to individuals in diverse social locations? How have the major players (students and teachers) experienced schooling? Have they all equally received the fruits of the so-called 'successful' schooling praised by outsiders? If not, are there any patterns of variation in the experiences and benefits gained from schooling? To what extent have students, teachers and various social groups maintained autonomy in their ability (however limited) to influence the shaping of schooling practice? Where has the state stood in these dynamic processes? In what ways have students, teachers, parents, divergent social groups and the state struggled to exert influence in shaping school practice, at both the policy-making level and the level of schooling practice?

Our starting assumption is that opportunities and resources are not distributed equally to everybody; and that even when the same opportunity

is given, one needs to be equipped with certain types, and a certain amount, of resources to be able to utilise that opportunity most effectively. Consequently, individuals (both students and teachers) in varied social locations (in the configuration made up of class, gender, minority status, region, etc.) undergo divergent experiences of schooling, and obtain differential benefits from it. In return, divergent social groups (some more powerful than others) and the state struggle to exert influence in shaping schooling practice at both macroscopic and microscopic levels.

The theme that will run through the book is the interplay of family, schooling and the wider social forces (including the state) that influence them. We consider that the structure of social relations is hierarchical, in that resources and power are unequally distributed; and that families are the main connection between students and the larger social structure. It is mainly the family that socialises children into class-specific culture, and directly provides resources (economic, cultural and social) for them. An individual student's school experience needs to be comprehended in relation to social processes on a larger scale, while such social processes at the structural level can most effectively be understood through the way they affect particular lives.

The book is based on a critical review of research published to date in both English and Japanese. We have inevitably brought in our own past research in various fields of education. We have tried to refer to the research published in English as much as possible, so that the reader can pursue topics of interest beyond this book. At the same time, we have tried to incorporate research published in the Japanese language in order to introduce the reader (who may not possess sufficient Japanese language proficiency) to a sample of the vast pool of research in the field of education that is available there.

Our extensive use of ethnographic research, and children's and teachers' own accounts of schooling (in Chapters 3, 4 and 5), is deliberate. We want to bring major participants in the schooling process to the centre stage, so that they can make their voices heard and, so that you, the reader, can make sense of their accounts. Naturally, we, as the researchers and authors of the book, present our own interpretations of these ethnographies and actors' accounts; but we also want to share with you these first-hand accounts and invite your own interpretation of them. If at the end of this book you can envision the many diverse faces of children and teachers we have tried to represent, we will consider that one of our aims has been achieved.

We hope that the differences that each of us brings to this book will be to its benefit. Our differences in gender, age, place of residence (Australia and Japan) and past career path have given rise to differences in perspective, which could sometimes be difficult to reconcile(!). There

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are also differences in our academic disciplinary backgrounds. One of us received research training in Japan in the 1960s, and has worked on school systems, policies and the history of modern Japanese education. His substantive areas of research are teachers (union movements, teacher education and certification), educational reforms, and, more recently, 'children's rights'. The other author undertook postgraduate studies in the sociology of education in the late 1980s in Australia and New Zealand, where she was a secondary-school teacher, and has focused on the practice of schooling at the microscopic level, and on the theories of inequality and education. Her substantive research areas have been working-class students and the school-to-work transition.

Our perspectives shape our perceptions, which inevitably involve screening and selection. Each of us perceives Japanese schooling from differing social positions, and we discussed our perceptions in the process of producing this book. We also tried to capitalise on the strengths of each other's past research experience, in deciding who would be the major author of each chapter. In some chapters we contributed equally. In all cases, drafts were discussed. One of us, familiar with the literature and research concerns in the Anglophone world, performed the task of writing the work in English, so that we could most effectively communicate our discussions to the reader. The end product, we hope, will provide a more comprehensive and balanced examination of Japanese schooling than a book that one or the other of us might have written alone. We must confess that both of us have learned enormously from the process of producing this book. We enjoyed it as much.

We wrote this book with two audience groups in mind. One consists of students and researchers of Japanese society, who are interested in knowing more about its practice of schooling in order to enhance their understanding of the society as a whole. The other group comprises students and researchers of education (in particular the fields of comparative education and the sociology and anthropology of education). They will be interested in the case of Japanese schooling as an example of education in 'another society', which may provide insights into a particular aspect of education that they are studying. For beginning students in both groups, we have attached a list of further reading at the end of each chapter.

The opening chapter introduces the reader to analytical frameworks for understanding the school's relationship to the society and individuals it serves, drawing on sociology of education. Chapter 2 examines the main developments of modern schooling in Japan, from the beginning of the Meiji era up to the present. The following two chapters are devoted to an examination of the practice of schooling as experienced by students. Chapter 3 examines first 'mainstream' education, and then

the schooling experienced by five different groups of students, namely girls, the poor, the male elites, youth in correspondence schools and rural youth from farming families. Chapter 4 then focuses on the schooling that minority groups experience (third-generation Koreans, *buraku* children and children of newcomers). In these two chapters we examine the nature of the varying relationships that respective groups develop with schools, and explore the consequences for individual students' life chances.

In Chapter 5, the focus shifts to the other major participants in the schooling process, the teachers. We examine the institutional systems that produce them and impose constraints on what they do, teachers' daily realities, and the culture of teaching. We also introduce three examples of the practice of teaching that Japanese teachers idealise, and present three teachers' life histories. Chapter 6 first examines the so-called pathological phenomena (bullying, school refusal and corporal punishment) that have given political justification for major educational reforms. We then scrutinise the policy proposals and the implementation of reforms in education during the 1980s and 1990s.

We are indebted to our colleagues in both Australia and Japan and, in particular, to the anonymous reviewers and to the editors at Cambridge University Press. Their critical and insightful comments have contributed to a much refined final product. Co-authoring across a long distance has not been easy. We have benefited from an Australian Research Council grant; and from Okano's sabbatical leave and La Trobe University's travel assistance, which provided us with excellent opportunities to work together at a late stage of production. Finally, we would like to thank our respective families, Fukuko, Kaoru and Maki, and David and Yukiko, for their support. Yukiko arrived during the gestation of the book, providing her parents with a new challenge as well as many pleasurable and needed distractions from excessive concentration on authorship.

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