Essay Review

Dominant Values in Japanese Education

LUCIEN ELLINGTON

Education in Japan: A Source Book by Edward R. Beauchamp and Richard Rubinger. New York: Garland Publishing, 1989. 300 pp. $42.00.

The Japanese School: Lessons for Industrial America by Benjamin Duke. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1986. 242 pp. $42.95 (cloth); $14.95 (paper).

Japanese Schooling: Patterns of Socialization, Equality, Political Control edited by James J. Shields, Jr. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989. 294 pp. $24.95.

Public Policy and Private Education in Japan by Estelle James and Gail Benjamin. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988. 218 pp. $39.95.

Many Americans, as a result of media exposure, are familiar with achievements and problems of Japanese schools. If one believes that understanding another culture's educational system can stimulate thinking about schooling in the United States, widespread interest by Americans in Japanese schools is a positive phenomenon.

Thanks to the authors' efforts in the four books cited above, scholars and lay people may now develop a substantial understanding of Japanese schools. Such an understanding would transcend a knowledge of structure, curriculum, successes, and problems and include a comprehension of the basic values undergirding Japan's schools that a majority of Japanese citizens expect the schools to transmit to the young. The primary objective of this essay is to describe four recently published books on Japanese education and to identify material common to each. Taken together, these works enhance understanding of the effects on Japanese schools of dominant cultural beliefs, such as perseverance, the primacy of the group, and the superiority of meritocracy.

Education in Japan: A Source Book, the fifth book in a series of reference books on international education, should be an invaluable guide for scholars, educators, and other professionals who wish to develop a comprehensive understanding of Japanese education. The authors, Edward R. Beauchamp and Richard Rubinger, have published extensively on the history of Japanese education. They bring a knowledge of the past and demonstrate an understanding of contemporary institutions and issues. The book's 14 chapters cover a broad range of topics from educational history to organization

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and structure of education, higher education, teacher education, textbooks, and reform. Each chapter includes a three- to five-page topical essay and a set of related bibliographic entries (989 total). The authors divide the entries in each chapter into two categories according to importance. The most important citations are accompanied by well-written annotations.

Although only slightly over one-third of the book is devoted to the time period before 1945, this section may prove the most useful. It provides direction for those who desire a historical context for understanding Japanese education.

In addition, there is much information on philosophical and value-related influences on education. The authors describe the widespread Japanese respect for education present long before Perry and the growth of Confucian-inspired formalism and hierarchy still present in Japanese schools. In their essay on Tokugawa education, Beauchamp and Rubinger also suggest an idea rooted in Confucianism that a student's success depends on perseverance rather than innate ability.

Japanese adults constantly exhort students to *gambaru,* or persevere. Benjiman Duke's *The Japanese School: Lessons for Industrial America* centers around this theme. Like Beauchamp and Rubinger, Duke is a recognized specialist on Japanese education and has written on a variety of subjects, including the Japanese teachers' union and democratic education in Japan. A former U.S. schoolteacher, he currently is a professor at International Christian University in Mitaka, Japan.

After a description of Japanese elementary and secondary educational successes, Duke devotes much of his book to an analysis of the processes by which Japanese elementary and secondary schools develop loyal, literate, competent, and diligent citizens and workers. Moreover, Duke integrates his analysis of Japanese socialization with fine descriptions of techniques Japanese teachers use to teach language and mathematics.

In Japanese history, folklore, and contemporary adult life, perseverance is an extremely valued trait. Throughout formal education, the importance of this value is reinforced in the minds of students. Japanese students are constantly in situations where individual effort is considered by teachers and peers to be as important as actual results. For example, junior and senior high school clubs, which play a very large role in the lives of Japanese students, are structured in a way that demands individual effort. Most students belong to only one club. Individual commitment to club goals is expected to be long term and intense. Sports clubs often schedule long practice sessions in early mornings, Saturday afternoons, and between semesters in which youngsters must participate enthusiastically to win peer acceptance.

In addition to extracurricular activities, both academic content and the structure of Japanese schooling emphasize the cultivation of effort

as a highly desirable personal trait. More individual effort is required to master written Japanese, with its mix of two syllabaries and thousands of Chinese characters, than is the case with other languages. Furthermore, the compulsory ethics course is mostly a study of famous Japanese and Westerners who, despite adversity, achieved their goals through dogged perseverance. And success in high school and university entrance examinations, often the two most critical junctures in determining a young person's future, depends largely on the effort an individual expends memorizing the incredibly vast amount of information included in the examinations. Duke's analysis of the high priority the Japanese place on effort illustrates an important philosophical difference between Japanese and Western schooling.

The Japanese School also contains an extensive description of how Japanese educators teach youngsters the importance of group loyalty. Japanese students belong to the same class (or *kumi*) throughout elementary and junior high school. Each *kumi* eats together, elects leaders, competes as a group in athletic events, takes field trips together, and so on. Within each *kumi* there are smaller groups called *hans*. Japanese teachers often give *hans* assignments in subjects such as science or social studies that require after-school meetings at members' houses, thus reinforcing group solidarity. Through both curricular and extracurricular activities, Japanese children learn early that individual self-sacrifice is often necessary for group success.

The last section of Duke's book is a discussion of what people in the United States and Japan can learn from one another's educational systems. According to Duke, Japanese success should motivate Americans to make education a much higher national priority than is presently the case and to demand higher achievement levels from students. Conversely, he argues, the Japanese should place slightly less emphasis on education. Expectations for teenagers in Japan are so great, particularly regarding the acquisition of much information needed solely for examination success, that many Japanese adolescents do not have enough free time to lead a well-rounded life.

Although basic cultural differences question how well Duke's prescriptions could apply to each country, the book, in general, is a superb analysis of the influence of societal values on daily life in Japanese schools.

The impact of values on schooling is also analyzed in *Japanese Schooling: Patterns of Socialization, Equality, and Political Control,* a collection of 21 essays edited by James Shields. The essays cover several topics, including nursery schools, school violence, mathematics achievement, the textbook controversies, and recent reform efforts.

Two of the best essays in the book, "Gambaru: A Japanese Cultural Theory of Learning," by John Singleton (pp. 8–15), and "The Asian Advantage: The Case of Mathematics," by Harold Stevenson (pp. 85–

95), strongly reinforce Duke's emphasis on the Japanese belief that effort counts much more than individual ability. For example, Singleton recounts his experiences following junior high teachers on their annual home visits and hearing their suggestions to parents that a particular child should exhibit more persistence. While the same teachers could give the author extensive information on their ninth graders' study habits, grades, and practice entrance examination scores, they were uniformly ignorant of individual student I.Q. scores. Although the I.Q. scores were available in the school office, Japanese teachers ignored them, believing such data irrelevant because effort, not I.Q., determines success.

In his now relatively famous study of U.S., Japanese, and Chinese elementary mathematics achievement, Harold Stevenson compares and contrasts the opinions of Japanese and American students and parents on the role of effort in academic success. Although it is common knowledge that Japanese students do well in mathematics compared to Americans, what has been less publicized by media in this country is the influence of values on performance. For example, Stevenson interviewed a sizeable sample of Japanese mothers of kindergarten children and American mothers of preschoolers. One-half of the Japanese mothers, but only 5 percent of the American mothers, believed their child's performance depended on how hard the child worked. When, in the same study, Japanese and American fifth graders were asked if they could excel in math through hard work, Japanese children agreed while American youngsters disagreed.

While these examples have positive implications for Japanese academic achievement, this value assumption has negative ramifications as well. Marilyn Golberg's essay on special education in Tokyo, also in Shields's book (pp. 176–84), indicates that a major reason for the historic lack of attention in Japan to students with special needs is the pervasive belief in a lack of individual differences.

Readers who desire a sophisticated understanding of how the Japanese inculcate group loyalty and cooperative skills in very young children have access to three excellent pieces on preschools in Shields's book. The essays by Catherine Lewis (pp. 28–44) and by Joseph Tobin, David Wu, and Dana Davidson (pp. 59–72) are reprints of *Comparative Education Review* articles.[1] The Lewis essay on cooperation and control in nursery schools offers rich descriptions of how Japanese teachers often use preschool children to enforce group norms with uncooperative peers. A major finding in Tobin, Wu, and Davidson's study is that many teachers prefer larger to smaller classes. In the former, youngsters learn more group skills since

[1] Catherine Lewis, "Cooperation and Control in Japanese Nursery Schools," *Comparative Education Review* 28, no. 1 (February 1984): 69–84; Joseph Jay Tobin, David Y. H. Wu, and Dana H. Davidson, "Class Size and Student/Teacher Ratios in the Japanese Preschool," *Comparative Education Review* 31, no. 4 (November 1987): 533–49.

they work with a wider variety of children. Furthermore, in Gary Decoker's examination of the curriculum of Japanese preschools (pp. 45–58), he found the major curricular focus of Japanese preschool curricula to be not academics but group participation and social skills.

There is, of course, a negative as well as a positive side to the tremendous emphasis Japanese schools place on group cohesion. Essays in Shields's book on school bullying, problems in junior high schools, the plight of Japanese children who have lived abroad, minority education, and the 1980s educational reform efforts all depict an overemphasis on the group by teachers and students. The victims of bullying, discrimination, and similar harassment almost always differ from their peers. Though there is currently much interest in Japan about developing more individualism in Japanese youth, most schools probably will continue to reflect and transmit the strong group orientation of Japanese culture.

In addition to the emphasis on effort and group loyalty, a third value present in Japanese society, at least since the early Meiji years, is the widely held belief that positions of influence and leadership should be awarded to individuals based on demonstrable talent.

From the essays in the Beauchamp and Rubinger *Source Book* and several pieces in Shields's *Japanese Schooling,* readers learn that, in the late nineteenth century, Japanese policymakers designed secondary schools and universities so that these institutions might identify the most promising youth and groom them for later national service. Thus, an educational system has evolved that could be the most meritocratic on earth.

Estelle James and Gail Benjiman systematically explore the positive and negative ramifications of the educational system as meritocracy in *Public Policy and Private Education in Japan.* Although *juku* and *yobiko* have received much publicity in this country, most students of Japanese schools are quite unfamiliar with the role of private secondary schools and universities in helping to perpetuate a system in which public schools and universities remain conduits to the best jobs.

Japan leads all advanced nations in percentage of private high schools, approximately 50 percent, and colleges and universities, approximately 80 percent. After providing a common public education for almost all elementary and junior high students, the Japanese government deliberately limits the number of public academic high schools and universities.

Japanese students who do not aspire to a university education enroll in public vocational high schools. Regardless of personal economic resources, students can enter the public academic high school or public university of their choice providing they can pass the entrance examinations. Students who cannot pass the tough public high school and university entrance examinations can, if they have the means, attend private high schools and universities that are expensive but generally easy to enter. Large numbers

of private educational institutions exist both because of consumer demand due to the limited supply of public high schools and universities and as a result of Japanese government subsidies to private schools.

The primary effect of the Japanese government policy limiting the supply of public academic high schools and universities is that such institutions are generally both more selective than, and academically superior to, private educational institutions. Based on the authors' empirical studies, students graduating from public universities in Japan obtain better positions in the public and private sectors than their private university counterparts.

Thus the most elite Japanese higher educational institutions, unlike those in the United States, are public. Also, Japanese higher education is much more meritocratic than higher education in many Western countries, including the United States, where any student, regardless of means, can attend a top university almost free of charge if he or she can pass the entrance examinations.

At the same time, the generally inflexible nature of the Japanese educational meritocracy has created a society obsessed with educational credentials, often at the expense of genuine learning. Consequently, the "late bloomer" or the student with substantial abilities who is not a good test taker may find his or her opportunities severely restricted.

The four books reviewed here, as well as other recent scholarly works on Japanese education (including *Educational Policies in Crisis: Japanese and American Perspectives,* edited by William K. Cummings and others [New York: Praeger, 1986], the 1987 U.S. Department of Education's *Japanese Education Today* [Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1987], and Merry White's *The Japanese Educational Challenge: A Commitment to Children* [New York: Free Press, 1987]) reinforce the important relationships between the three values addressed in this essay and contemporary Japanese educational practices.

Together, these books, all published in the 1980s, along with such outstanding earlier books as Herbert Passin's *Society and Education in Japan* (New York: New York Teacher's College Press, 1965; reprint, 1982) and Thomas Rohlen's *Japan's High Schools* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983) now constitute a rich vein of information through which a substantial understanding may be gained of the beliefs behind the behaviors of Japanese students, parents, and teachers.