

## BOOK REVIEWS

# Japanese and American Education

## *Attitudes and Practices*

By Harry Wray

WESTPORT, CT: BERGIN & GARVEY, 1999

336 PAGES

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In eight chapters and 336 dense pages, Harry Wray presents his description of the strengths and weaknesses of the educational systems of these two countries. At the end of each chapter, he makes specific recommendations based on insights gleaned primarily from practices in the other country. As a long-term resident of Japan, most recently as Professor of Japanese History and International Relations in the College of Foreign Studies at Nanzan University in Nagoya, Japan, Wray has the benefit of an insider's view of Japanese education, and his descriptions of it include common complaints made by many of the country's citizens, e.g., rigid Ministry of Education policies and too much pressure from examinations. His views of U.S. education often seem to be drawn from center-right commentators such as Lynne Cheney, Chester Finn, and Diane Ravitch.

One of the strengths of the book is its bibliography of recent American research on Japanese education. Wray meticulously cites his

sources, albeit with a few typos, leaving the reader equipped to further explore any topic. He also points to some of the pitfalls of the comparative research as it is reported in the American media and represented in the popular culture. For instance, he stresses the differences between the school experiences of Japanese elementary and secondary school students and between students who are competing to enroll in elite universities and those who are less ambitious. The overall conception of the book, however, is to present a summary of existing research rather than to tread new ground. As such, the book succeeds in presenting some of the best American work on Japanese education along with some of the standard critiques of the Japanese public.

Probably the best way to give a flavor of the book is to list some of Wray's suggestions. Many of them will sound familiar, some version having been mouthed by one or the other candidate in the recent U.S. presidential campaign. When I read them, I found myself nodding in agreement at some of them, while at the same time doubting that they could ever be implemented. Others seem a bit farfetched. In short, it was a lot like listening to a campaign speech.

Some sample suggestions for the U.S.: in the K-12 schools—community service programs, moral education classes, annual achievement tests, ten-month school year, more active federal and state role, higher pay for teachers, and more core courses; for post-secondary education—the use of achievement tests in college admission and more opportunities for minorities. To increase the seriousness of high school students—end compulsory education at tenth grade so that “students who attend school beyond that point would realize they are enjoying a privilege (210).

For the Japanese: to foster attitudes of internationalism—global education classes, student and faculty exchanges, and attempts by the entire society to transmit to its youth “an expanded love and concern for our fellow human beings that recognizes the intrinsic dignity of every individual, minority, and nationality” (120). To revitalize an educational system that “has become obsolete and lacks humanity” (166)—require attendance at comprehensive secondary schools (either neighborhood public or private), give more attention to students who are passing through the system without engaging in serious study, rid the country of *juku* and *yobikō* (private cram schools). In his summary statement, Wray encourages Japan to “foster more individualized education and diversity,” and he ends the book with five questions that each country should explore (297). These questions revolve around civic values, curriculum, academic standards, character formation, and community.

As a teaching resource, Wray's book might be useful as a reference for a professor in an undergraduate education course. The price of \$78 makes it inappropriate for a required textbook. In summary, the book is made up of one man's opinions, and some of those opinions might spark a reaction—either sympathetic or not—and provoke a discussion among a group of undergraduates. ■

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