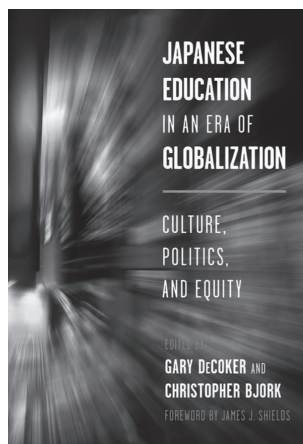


Japanese Education in an Era of Globalization

Culture, Politics, and Equity

GARY DECOKER AND CHRISTOPHER BJORK (EDITORS)
NEW YORK: TEACHERS COLLEGE PRESS, 2013
224 PAGES, ISBN: 978-0807754238, PAPERBACK

Reviewed by W. Lawrence Neuman



This eleven-chapter book grew from a series of meetings after the launch of the Japan Special Interest Group in the Comparative and International Education Society in 2007. It documents educational changes in Japan since the 1990 burst of their “Bubble Economy” and the onset of nearly two decades of recession. The editors highlight the following five themes: (1) Global Interaction, especially the PISA (Programme for International Student Achievement) test results; (2) Changing School Contexts, the continued role

of supplemental-education and the competition for school entrance; (3) the Diminishing Role of the Ministry of Education (now MEXT), particularly with the 2002 educational reforms and decentralized authority; (4) Equity, increased inequality of school experiences and outcomes; and (5) Minorities, inequalities and specialized schooling.

After a chapter in which Diane Hoffman outlines trends in culture versus structural effects on education, three empirical chapters examine pre-high school education. Akiko Hayashi and Joseph Tobin’s ethnography documents a relative continuity in Japanese preschool education. By contrast, the chapter by Christopher Bjork and Rebecca Fukuzawa finds significant changes in middle schools. Student behavior has become more assertive or aggressive, while the range of permitted teacher responses to misbehavior shrank, forcing increasingly frustrated teachers to adapt to a far more challenging environment. In the next chapter, Motoko Akiba and Kazuhiko Shimizu focus on *ijime*, bullying, which they discover to be widespread in middle schools, with one in four students a victim and nearly all incidents occurring within school and between same-gender peers. Their survey data suggests that bullying students feel more distant and negative toward teachers. It may be that the combination of changed student behavior with weakened teacher authority contributed to a more varied, disruptive school environment, allowing for more bullying than in the past.

The next three chapters consider multicultural and ethnic minority schooling in Japan. Kaori Okano notes that ethnic-immigrant schooling began with local initiatives and greater local autonomy. Although they may have expanded opportunities for minority students, minority schools rarely offered the educational qualifications required for a pathway into mainstream employment. Looking specifically at schooling for the Ainu minority, Christopher Frey found a spread of culturally relevant curriculum. However, it is geographically limited with little impact beyond Hokkaido Prefecture. June Gordon’s

chapter on the Nikkei (Latin Americans of Japanese ancestry who returned) echoes findings of the two prior chapters. Despite improvements and local accommodations, national schooling policies and practices failed to incorporate multiculturalism systematically in ways to provide quality education for all of Japan’s minority students.

The last three chapters document how the 2002 school reforms, advanced by the “odd bedfellows” of neo-liberal politicians and humanistic educators, accelerated social and educational inequality. An examination of PISA test data on achievement and attitudes among fifteen-year-olds by Hyunjoon Park and Yeon-Jin Lee finds that an unintended consequence of *yutori kyōiku*, (relaxed education), reform has been declining achievement scores, concentrated among the most socially and economically disadvantaged students. The widening achievement gap has a parallel in student attitudes toward learning math. The authors conclude that the 2002 reforms and related changes, such as ability grouping and expanded school choice, generated large differences in achievement. The most advantaged students held steady, but the disadvantaged students fell behind. In the next chapter, Tomoaki Nomi finds that parental income and cultural capital are strongly related to junior high student test results. In a significant study on Tokyo-area junior high entrance exams, Ryoko Tsuneyoshi finds reform-related changes and increases in private schooling created intensified junior high school entrance competition for the children of upper-middle income families. At the same time, the *juku*, (supplemental school), has become organized along corporate lines and increased in importance. A major outcome of the 2002 reforms has been that Tokyo’s upper-middle-income parents are abandoning most public schools, instead sending their children to private schools or a few elite public schools.

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Instructors in undergraduate comparative education courses or who teach about Japan generally will find the book's nonspecialist writing level useful.

In summary, DeCoker and Bjork have brought together in one place important studies on the changes in Japanese education over the past two decades. The essays cohere better than most edited books; however, I see two limitations. First, all essays implicitly contrast current educational conditions with those of 1960s–1980s Japan. Yet, outside the introduction's short, cursory overview, the earlier era is not discussed. Readers familiar with Japan's pre-1990s educational system will quickly understand the contrasts being made, but others without such familiarity may not easily see the full effects of reform-related changes. Likewise, beyond a few brief references, the essays do not compare conditions in Japan's school system with those of other advanced nations. Readers without a background in comparative education may wonder about the applicability of the book's findings to education elsewhere. Instructors assigning the book may want to maximize its utility by providing background on Japan's school system in the 1960s–1980s and comparative information.

Second, "Japanese Education" in the title is a little misleading, since most attention is on pre-high school education, not the entire educational system. While many educational changes are included, others are omitted. One is a dramatic change in gender equity, with the near-disappearance of the all-female junior colleges and female attendance at four-year universities reaching parity with males. Also underreported is the spreading angst in Japan's high schools, of so-called "freeters" and "neets," i.e., young adults facing underemployment, part-time or temporary work, and unemployment. Entrance into second- and third-tier universities has become noncompetitive due to the demographic decline of youth cohorts and a declining or stagnant white-collar job market.

Instructors in undergraduate comparative education courses or who teach about Japan generally will find the book's nonspecialist writing level useful. They may wish to assign chapters on specific topics that are sure to spark student discussion. Especially valuable are chapters on the 2002 reforms, rising achievement inequality, bullying, and intensifying competition for private junior high entrance. Instructors might also use the chapters on minority education to highlight limitations in Japan's recent moves toward embracing multiculturalism, as well as national versus local policy differences. ■

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