

ESSAY BOOK REVIEWS

National Standards and School Reform in Japan and the United States

Edited by Gary DeCoker

New York, Teachers College Press, 2002

218 Pages. Paperback.

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Since *A Nation at Risk* was published in 1983, Japan has become a standard from which to compare education in the U.S. and Japan. Aspects of Japan's educational system have been brandished as solutions for perceived educational problems in the U.S. Looking at Japan, some have suggested that we increase the number of hours in school or the length of the school day. Others have argued for school uniforms. Yet others promote more standardized testing. When these decisions were made, the context of schooling in Japan might have been mentioned, but in many cases context was disregarded. *National Standards and School Reform in Japan and the United States* does not provide a list of changes, but focuses on a better understanding of the role of national standards and reforms in curriculum change in Japan. It does not start with the assumption that Japan's centralized educational system is rigid and monolithic. Rather, the book presents a clear perspective on the shaping of educational policy through interactions between players at many levels of the educational hierarchy. The given in all this is the entrance examinations.

Often, readers skim over the introduction of an edited book and turn to the chapters. You do not want to do that with this book. The Introduction frames the book by presenting background for the comparison of Japan with the U.S., and it clearly states the themes the book addresses. These are Educational Reform: Top-down, Bottom-up, and the Soft Middle; The Private and the Public Sectors: Separate or Intertwined?; Textbooks and Teachers' Editions: Tools or Crutches, Assets or Detriments?; National Standards, Teacher Professional Development and Classroom Practice; and Breaking Down the Stereotypes.

These themes are organized in four parts with ten chapters. Thomas Rohlen, who has written extensively on Japan, including writing about Japan's high schools, writes the epilogue. The four parts of the book are distinct, yet the main themes are intertwined within the chapters. At the end of each chapter is a brief summary. This format creates a book that is cohesive and easy to read.

Part I, The Creation of National Standards: Influences from



Above and Below, introduces the reader to the Ministry of Education, teachers, advisors, and their roles in making changes to the *Course of Study*. The *Course of Study* is the guideline for each grade level and the content to be taught in public schools. In chapter one, Azuma elaborates on how the ministry of education and several committees collaborate to change the *Course of Study*, and what is to be taught and included in the textbooks.

In chapter two, LeTendre suggests that educational policy change is slow due to the structure of the Ministry of Education. He clarifies that elementary and middle schools are under the supervision of municipalities or districts, while the prefecture supervises high schools. Thus, there is a decoupling between the curricula. LeTendre says, "The overall educational system, then, can be characterized as one of loose vertical linkages with strong lateral connections" (p. 23).

LeTendre says that there has been an enormous growth in the number of high school students over the last fifty years. With this, the entrance examinations have become gatekeepers, and the examinations play a major role in shaping what is taught in schools. LeTendre succinctly claims, "At present these teachers essentially face a situation where the MOE [Ministry of Education] determines the curriculum guidelines, and the entrance exams drive how they implement these guidelines" (p. 31).

Part II addresses the role of textbooks and teachers' editions in education. In chapter three, Tsuchida and Lewis compare the content of textbooks and the organization of elementary science textbooks in Japan and the U.S. A key message is that Japanese textbooks seem to emphasize *doing* while U.S. textbooks focus on *reading about* science. U.S. textbooks tend to be very wordy and require a great deal of reading. Japanese textbooks are limited in content volume by the *Course of Study*. When the topic is not in the *Course of Study* at a particular grade level, that topic should not be addressed in the textbooks. On the other hand, U.S. textbooks try to cover the curricula of many states. As a result, the content tends to be broad and shallow, and the topics may not fit a particular district's curricular sequence.

In chapter four, Lewis, Tsuchida, and Coleman highlight a major difference between the U.S. and Japan in how texts are written. At the elementary level, Japanese classroom teachers have a great say in what is in the textbooks, and some teachers are involved in group revisions of textbooks. In the U.S., when teachers are involved in revising textbooks, it is often an individual.

In chapter five, Lee and Zusho compare U.S. and Japanese elementary teachers' manuals. U.S. teachers' resource packages are identified as taking the "dictionary approach" (p. 79). The focus is on terms and not the structure of mathematics. In addition, the lesson plans in U.S. and Japanese teachers' manuals approach teaching mathematics differently. U.S. books tend to be procedural while the Japanese texts are more conceptual.

Part III, Teaching and Professional Development: Working to Improve the Standards, includes two chapters. In chapter six, Stevenson provides an overview of classroom instructional strategies and the organization of teaching in school. Stevenson asserts

that student differences in learning can be addressed through how the teacher approaches teaching.

Shimahara's chapter on professional development is a concise, yet clear view of professional development for teachers in Japan. Shimahara describes *kenshu*, mastery through study, at prefectural and national education centers, the internship year, and school-based teacher development. One school-based professional development opportunity at the elementary school is *lesson study*. In *lesson study*, a group of teachers in a school, over a period of a year, will work together on a question that addresses student learning. This type of professional development is currently spreading in the U.S. However, *lesson study* is less widespread among secondary teachers. How do secondary teachers continue to improve their teaching? We only hear, "In general school-based *kenshu* is more active at the elementary level and, by comparison, it tends to be formalistic and inactive at the secondary level" (p. 112).

While this chapter clarifies professional development opportunities available in Japan, it glosses over a phenomenon that is quite different between the two countries. U.S. states have some sort of mechanism that requires teachers to continue professional development after they receive certification. Japanese teachers, after the first year, have few required professional development demands. I would have liked to hear how this limited formal requirement of professional development influences Japanese teachers.

Part IV, Implementing and Reacting to Educational Policy: Responses from Within and Outside of the System, considers actual reforms and the role of the private sector in the educational system. Chapter eight, "It's Glacial: Incrementalism and Japan's Reform of Foreign Language Education," incorporates many of the themes in this edited book, including the slowness of change, the role of teachers and others in policy, and the link between the *Course of Study* and entrance examinations. In this chapter McConnell examines a national program that brings native language speakers to Japan to assist Japanese language teachers. While several languages are included, English speakers from outside Japan make up the largest number of these Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs). This program requires several government agencies to work together to implement the placement of ALTs in public middle and high schools.

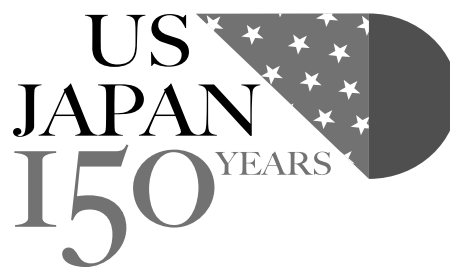
I found this chapter particularly interesting since I taught in Japanese high schools and colleges in the 80s and the 90s. I can attest to the theme that change is slow. English language teaching in the classroom has not changed a great deal over those years, though there are more ALTs.

McConnell does a superb job making his argument that though educational policy may come from the top, the players at the top are not always in agreement. In addition, those at the prefectural and district levels have a great deal of say in how policy is initiated and reshaped to fit the circumstances of different schools. Though ALTs have become a part of schools and the curriculum, they too must work around the entrance examinations.

In chapter nine, DeCoker follows up on earlier considerations in previous chapters of the reforms in education that have reduced the number of credits required in schools, while providing opportunities for more electives. While the goal was to encourage students to study different subjects, in many cases the results have led to a greater focus on preparing for entrance examinations with the extra time. DeCoker draws on a specific case in Yamagata Prefecture that helps the reader understand how the reform is being implemented differently than intended.

The last chapter examines the role of *juku*-cram schools—and their impact on public education. Russell points out, ". . . private tutoring helps to erode the authority of the public school system because private learning need not align itself with official educational standards" (p. 159). Of the three categories of *juku*: remedial, enrichment, and exam-focused, the exam-focused *juku* challenge *The Course of Study*. Large *juku* gather data from past entrance examination results to specific universities. Then the instructors at the *juku* can teach the test. While Russell does present some statistics on the number of students attending *juku*, this information in a table format would have been more useful.

Russell also highlights that the role of the private sector in the U.S. is expanding. With current reforms in the U.S., e.g., charter schools, vouchers, for-profit companies running schools, and standardized testing, opportunities abound for the private sector to find a niche in public schools. On the other hand, though the pri-



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vate sector in Japan may influence students through their study at the *juku*, the *juku* remain outside the schools.

In the Epilogue, Rohlen eloquently ties together the chapters, analyzing and highlighting the distinction between coercion from the top in the U.S. in implementing national standards with Japan's complex hierarchical system with horizontal linkages. Though the Ministry of Education does make policy, it is accomplished through communicating with teachers and administrators. It is more interactive than in the U.S.

Rohlen then speculates on the future of education with information technology influencing what countries consider compulsory education and how our concept of school may change. This deliberation I found less helpful in understanding the role of standards and reforms in the two countries than other portions of the Epilogue.

After reading the book, I am left with just a few questions. What do the authors, policy makers, and administrators mean by Guidelines and National Standards? Are they working with the same definitions? How are changes in the *Course of Study* handled differently at the elementary and secondary levels? For example, since students are tracked in Japanese high schools, do the academic high schools differ in the way they organize courses than a school with few students planning on continuing to college?

Overall, this book accentuates that the *Course of Study* in Japan is a starting point for the curriculum at the national level. The *Course of Study* is a guideline and not a detailed list of objectives. The Ministry of Education is not a governmental organization that does what it wishes. Rather we see through the explanations and the case studies how top-down, bottom-up, and lateral linkages interact. Because of this communication, change is slow, or glacial as McConnell suggests.

This book also highlights that people are important. This includes the mid-level education administrators as well as the teachers in the school. Teachers have a role in formulating what goes into the textbooks, and at the elementary level, many teachers collaborate in improving teaching. This raises a question that policy makers and teachers in the U.S. need to ponder, "Are teachers, policy makers, and textbook publishers ready for this collaboration and the time involved?"

Anyone who has an interest in education in Japan, teacher professional development, and the role of standards in the U.S. should find this book invaluable. Teachers, administrators, and policy makers can gain an understanding of how standards and reforms have helped shape education in Japan, a country often compared with the U.S. This book can also serve as a textbook for undergraduate or graduate courses that examines the formation of educational policy, comparative education, or international education.

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The Man Who Divided India An Insight into Jinnah's Leadership and Its Aftermath

By Rafiq Zakaria

Mumbai, Popular Prakashan, 2001.
276 pages. Hardback.
ISBN: 81-7154-892-x



This book is written for popular audiences in India, the West, and in the United States. It became a bestseller in India probably because of its secular overtones and nationalist bias. This critical biography analyzes the condition of Muslims in Pakistan after Jinnah's death (1948), while giving a historical background to the formation of the state. According to Zakaria, Jinnah began his political career as a messenger of Hindu-Muslim unity, but ended as 'communalist' whose ultimate aim became to divide the Indian subcontinent on the basis of religion. This, contends Zakaria, Jinnah achieved by injecting fear of 'Islam in danger' among the Muslims.

Jinnah was an English-educated lawyer who stubbornly believed in a strict constitutional path to politics. He utterly loathed and despised Gandhi's leadership and the agitational approach of his Indian National Congress (hereafter the Congress). He singlehandedly rebuilt the Muslim League in the 1930s and 40s and made it his objective to achieve parity with the Congress. This he did by siding with the British in their opposition to the anti-imperialist Gandhian nationalist movement. He constantly hammered into the minds of Muslims that Gandhi and the Congress party represented the interest of Hindus and that a Hindu Raj (rule) would replace the British Raj and Muslims would be reduced to slavery. This was the plank on which he raised the bogy of 'Islam in danger' if the Muslims did not act to demand a separate state of Pakistan. This was also the basis for his Two-Nation Theory, which stated that Hindus and Muslims were two different nations and that they could never live together as one (totally negating the fact that they had lived together for over a thousand years before the advent of British rule). So apparently Jinnah was playing a political game by using religion as a tool to claim for himself the leadership of the entire Muslim community of South Asia. In his personal life Jinnah never really cared much about religion or God. He had no interest in Islamic principles, the *Quran*, or even Muslim culture. He lived the life of a wealthy English gentleman, openly ate pork, consumed whiskey, wore expensive European clothing, and married a non-Muslim. In fact he was even ignorant of Urdu, the language of the majority Muslims. Why then did the Muslims overwhelmingly support him?