

Understanding Japan

Japanese Education

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According to Professor Katsuta Shuichi, the primary author of this concise but concentrated overview of Japanese education, the main objective of this work is to inform others of Japan and the Japanese education system. The authors also hope to offer some support to those countries beginning educational modernization in anticipation of economic and technical development. Although this latter goal may be somewhat ambitious for ninety-one pages, the booklet does offer an excellent survey of the history behind Japan's renowned educational system, as well as a close look at the present organization of schooling in Japan, including relatively up-to-date educational statistics in the form of charts, tables, and graphs.

The booklet, in its fourth, revised printing, is organized into six main sections: Historical Background and Modernization, General View of Education in Japan, School Education, Social Education, Educational Finance, and Non-Governmental Educational Movements. The historical background, which constitutes almost a third of the book, succeeds very well in chronicling the development of an organized and modern schooling system. Readers need not have any background on Japan or Japanese education to understand and process the material in this section: the subsections are brief, and the authors have woven an interesting and enjoyable narrative through their clear expository writing. In keeping with their objective of providing a context for the present educational system, the authors spend a healthy amount of time discussing education in Tokugawa and Meiji Japan.

Although the historical section does include background information on educational progress and reform in twentieth-century Japan, these subsections noticeably omit much reference to the political and military situation at the beginning of the century. Another glaring exclusion concerns the role of the United States in educational reform in postwar Japan. The subsection which provides background on education after World War II begins with this one reference to the U.S.: "In 1946, the U.S. Educational Mission with Dr. G. D. Stoddard as leader visited Japan to make a report on the reconstruction of education in Japan. On the Japanese side, too, those with democratic views on education put their efforts into the establishment of a new educational theory and policy" (31). Since the objective of the Historical Background section is to provide background and context to Japan's modern educational system, this critical period in which basic educational reform was written into the 1947 Japanese Constitution, with obvious assistance from the

U.S., deserves more explanation than this vague passage. The section ends, though, with a candid three-page subsection entitled "Present Problems and Future Prospects." Because the problems enumerated occur not only in Japan but also in other developed nations, this section, with its explicit descriptions, would be a good addition to any Comparative Education course unit on Japanese or East Asian education.

In the rest of *Japanese Education*, the authors interpret the general aims of education in Japan by explicating the organization of schooling from preschool through higher education. By beginning with a reference to the Fundamental Law of Education enacted in 1947, the authors have laid the groundwork for a comprehensive, yet succinct, profile of Japanese education. By commencing with the motive behind education as stated in the 1947 document, they allow the reader to witness how the government has engineered educational policy to meet the goals of the state. Through detailed descriptions, the reader is offered a portrait of Japanese school system organization and school education that few materials on Japanese education even several times its length manage to do.

The book does an especially commendable job of addressing the obstacles and difficulties Japan has confronted on its way to attaining a modern, stable, and effective educational system. One lengthy section discusses one of the more pressing issues facing education—the change in industry—and the need for reform to address this situation. The changes in the industrial structure and in the demand for labor put pressure on the education system, and in order to meet this demand, diversification of the school system, particularly in secondary schools, was hailed as the solution. The number of vocational and training schools was increased, and extreme competition for spots in the best high schools developed. Consequently, "bad effects of competition in entrance examinations and education based on the formula used to evaluate such scores appear[ed]" (50). These current educational problems have caused new and varied approaches to the situation, several of which the booklet summarizes in some detail.

Even though *Japanese Education* glosses over some of the more pressing issues and problems, such as the entrance examination system, with optimism, the booklet has done a commendable job of presenting such an involved process—the modernization of education in Japan—in a readable way and including such detailed information within a broader narrative. For these reasons the booklet is an important resource and should be considered as supplemental reading for anyone considering or researching Japanese education. ■

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