In tandem with Routledge’s recent volume, *The History of Education of Japan, 1600-2000* (Tsujimoto and Yamasaki eds., 2017), the current work is a useful primer for overseas academics wishing to familiarize themselves with the history of modern Japanese education practice. The volume adopts three general approaches that warrant further comment.

First, by choosing to look at educational change through the lens of progressive education, this volume provides a “much-needed corrective” to stereotypical images of Japanese education as being overly “formal,” conservative and tradition-bound (p. 1). Yoko Yamashiki’s overview (Chapter 1) of early 20th reformist movements challenges this impression, and this point is emphasized throughout the book. Hiroyuki Kuno’s and Kie Fujiwara’s analyses (Chapters 2 and 3, respectively) of state-sponsored normal schools, for example, document the ways reformist institutions could—through their high number of kengaku (observer) visitors and active publishing of research (pp. 32, 47)—influence the nation’s broader education system. Masayuki Haga’s essay (Chapter 4) also traces the ways leading artists, such as Kanae Yamamoto and Hakutei Ishii, propagated a new, “expressive” arts education. By highlighting the ways these reformist trends influenced broader public discourse, the essay suggests a reason why Japan has—in stark contrast to the perennial budget cutting within the United States and other western countries—remained consistently supportive of “creative” education. Finally, Ayako Kawaji’s article (Chapter 7) on the Daily Life Writing Movement explores how reformist pedagogy could become a nation-wide, grass-roots phenomenon. Kawaji follows the development of Daily Life Writing from the “free subject” pedagogy of the late Meiji, through the socially engaged, critical approaches of the 1930s, to the collaborative “logic of living” discourses of the postwar period. These essays present vivid examples of diverse historical actors creating alternatives to state-imposed, education orthodoxy.

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Second, building on the work of Jane Martin (cf. Martin, 2003), many of the essays use “biography” as the unit of analysis. These works avoid presenting education reform as disembodied ideas and practices. Instead, they ground educational change within the agency and social context of an individual’s life-course (pp. 5-6). By exploring the life of curricular theorist Heiji Oikawa, for example, Fujiwara unpacks the complex nature of his ideas and writings. Biography is deployed to trace the contingent, evolving nature of Oikawa’s educational philosophy: the essay both acknowledges Oikawa’s diverse engagement with foreign discourses, while highlighting his enduring commitment to child-centered, teacher-led practice. Likewise, by focusing on the life trajectories of Motoko Hani and Kuniyoshi Obara (Chapters 5 and 6, respectively), biographical analysis is used to highlight individuals’ deep attachment to progressive ideals. Education historians in other contexts have noted the ways schools in the early 20th century embraced progressive rhetoric while ignoring its actual implementation (cf. Zilversmit, 1993). Naoshi Kira’s and Hiroyuki Sakuma’s essays on Hani and Obara show a counterpoint to this trend. They link the personal, religiously informed experiences of their subjects to the educational precepts Hani and Obara eventually came to adhere to --even when it came at great political and economic cost. Akira Nakano and Yamasaki’s essay (Chapter 8) on Satoru Umene further illustrates the need to evaluate the careers of educators in totality. Umene is often associated with the “failure” of his core curriculum movement in the immediate postwar period, but this essay reminds readers of Umene’s contribution to education history, specifically his decades-long editorship of the 100-volume compendium Selections of World Pedagogy and the 40-volume Series of the World History of Education. Umene helped generations of Japanese teachers expand their understanding of world educational trends, as well as legitimizing the discipline of history within academic education research.

Finally, these essays attempt to understand modern Japanese education practice through the concept of “cultural encounters.” Although it is well known that Japan has actively participated in the transnational flow of educational ideas and practices, the essays underscore the ways such interactions went beyond simple mimicry of the West. Kanae Nishioka’s essay (Chapter 9), for example, explores how a junior high school teacher, Hama Omura, built upon Occupation reforms to create new practices of reflective learning. Yamasaki’s article (Chapter 10) on Shinichiro Hori’s Kinokuni Children’s Village School, in turn, traces an ongoing, nearly century-long “encounter” between British and Japanese progressive educators. As Kinokuni’s recent merger with John Aitkenhead’s Kilquhanity School in Scotland demonstrates, it is a relationship that continues to stimulate and enrich practice on both sides. Hiroyuki Kuno’s discussions of Nara Higher Women’s Normal Affiliated Elementary School (Chapters 2 and 11), in turn, underscore how such “encounters” assumed global significance. Although starting off as a modest reworking of American experiential pedagogy, the efforts of the school’s two directors, Takeji Kinoshita and Takayasu Shigematsu, eventually gave rise to the modern Lesson Study movement (pp. 39, 172-173). Such transnational encounters have therefore contributed directly to a world-wide reimagining of practitioner development, collaboration, and in-service training.

As the title implies, this volume is focused on the impact of “progressivism” on Japanese education reform. This is possibly a practical result of its existence as part of Routledge’s series, Progressive Education: Policy, Politics and Practice. Nonetheless, questions can be raised as to whether “progressivism” is the most useful way to conceive of education
reform. Debates over what exactly “progressivism” means, and who should rightfully be considered “progressive” (or even whether “progressivism” should be considered positively in the first place) are long-standing among historians of education (cf. Kliebard, 1993). To be fair, Yamasaki and Kuno recognize this: they define “progressivism” flexibly and practically as those discourses associated with the Taisho-era “New Education” movement, as well as with the ideas of John Dewey (p. 2-3). But even with such a broad definition, questions remain. Should the Daily Life Writing movement be considered “progressive”? Particularly among Daily Life Writing’s “Northern Education” stream, the ideas of Wilhelm Dilthey (and even of Karl Marx) were more explicitly engaged with than those of Dewey. Umene’s and Obara’s educational contributions were, likewise, inspired by “encounters” not limited to progressive, Anglo-American discourses. As Yamasaki and Nakano note, one compelling aspect of Umene’s later scholarship was the extent to which he took the educational history of developing nations seriously (p. 134-135). Sakuma also notes how Obara’s concept of Zenjin partially arose from his engagement with Neo-Kantian and Kyoto School ideas (p. 104). These criticisms might be splitting hairs, but they highlight a larger point: Japan’s reformist tradition has arguably been most dynamic when it has engaged the world in its full diversity. As Japanese government policy increasingly commits to following fewer –generally American—education models, this issue is not merely an academic one.

This reservation notwithstanding, this is an important and thought-provoking volume. It is hoped that other overseas academic publishers will follow Routledge’s example and solicit more works from Japan’s leading historians of education.

References