Review Article

Education in Japan: A Comprehensive Analysis of Education Reforms and Practices.

Edited by Yuto Kitamura, Toshiyuki Omomo, and Masaaki Katsuno,
Singapore: Springer, 2019.

Edward Vickers*

This volume might more appropriately have been entitled *Education in Japan: The View from the University of Tokyo's Graduate School of Education*, since its unifying feature is that all the contributors are faculty there. But this is by no means to diminish its value. While far from entirely 'comprehensive' (no single volume could be), it presents Anglophone readers with thoughtful analyses of various aspects of Japanese education, while offering fascinating insights into the perspectives of professors at Japan's premier higher education institution. Given the intensely hierarchical nature of Japanese politics and academia, this in itself lends this collection added significance: these contributors are, as Kitamura notes in his introduction, highly 'influential' (2). While, as we shall see, some are highly critical of aspects of official policy, their institutional affiliation places them at, or very near, the heart of the Japanese establishment. The tensions implicit in this status may account for some significant omissions in their analysis: what they leave unsaid is in some ways as interesting as what they do say.

As the Foreword by Shigeo Kodama (Faculty Dean) emphasises, the Education Faculty of the University of Tokyo owes its origins to the (American-imposed) 'democratising' reforms of the post-war era. The faculty has 'contributed,' Kodama asserts, 'to the democratisation of education' and has 'left a brilliant footprint as the base of post-war democracy' (v). That institutional commitment to principles of democracy and equality – the latter a particularly strong feature of post-war policy on schooling – is reflected in a number of the chapters, which are strongly critical of the ways in which the authors feel these principles have been eroded or traduced by recent reforms. In Chapter 2, on primary and secondary education, Toshiyuki Omomo notes the strengthening influence, since the 1980s, of 'neoliberalism' and 'conservatism' in debates over education reform, with 'new public management' informing attempts to introduce 'results-oriented governance,' thereby stoking tensions amongst

* Kyushu University
e-mail: edvickers08@googlemail.com

elites across government, business and the education profession. Chapters on higher education (by Hideto Fukudome and Akiko Morozume), on ‘social education’ (by Jeongyun Lee) and on administrative reform (by Yusuke Murakami) feature recurring themes of intensifying central control, attempts by executives to arrogate more power to themselves (at the expense of the consultative, consensual institutions of the post-war *status quo*), and the displacement of concerns with democracy and equality by a profoundly instrumentalist and economic conception of education.

The vision of education as a mechanism for generating ‘human capital’ for national development has always been strongly evident in modern Japan. As Kitamura notes in Chapter 1, Japan’s post-war schooling system was highly effective in supplying factories and offices with a literate, numerate and thoroughly socialised workforce. However, since the old economic model hit the buffers in the 1990s, the coupling of that human capital orientation with concerns for equality, democracy and community has significantly weakened. This has been reflected in: a steady shift away from ‘consensus’ to a ‘majoritarian’ ethos of governance (74); attempts to promote marketisation and ‘choice’ over equality and uniformity (77); efforts to extend bureaucratic control over various aspects of educational practice in the name of ‘accountability’; and ‘trivialisation’ and de-funding of activities such as ‘social education’ (58) that serve ends not readily quantifiable or measurable in economic terms. As Yuki Honda writes in Chapter 10, the bursting of Japan’s economic ‘bubble’ in 1990 radically undermined the social contract offering lifelong security in return for grinding toil in the office, factory or home. As employers and government have subsequently failed to adapt (maintaining the rigid practice of ‘blanket recruitment’ of age cohorts upon university graduation and a labour market starkly discriminating between secure, lifelong employees and the rest), the responsibility for coping with this new era of insecurity has been foisted upon the young. An ideology of ‘individualised meritocracy’ has been officially promoted, with young people widely derided for their failure to become effective entrepreneurs of the self.

If young people are subject to a sometimes vicious ‘deficit discourse’, so too are teachers. The impressive tradition of professional reflection, critique and communal learning amongst teachers, manifested in collective ‘lesson study’ practices and, earlier, in self-reflective teacher ‘narratives,’ are discussed in chapters by Yasuhiko Fujie and Sachiko Asai. However, Masaaki Katsuno, in Chapter 7 on ‘Teachers’ Working Conditions and Teacher Quality,’ cites a TALIS survey showing that lack of confidence and general dissatisfaction amongst Japanese teachers are today especially high by international standards (87). In the name of raising ‘quality’, the Ministry of Education, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has taken various measures, from requiring renewal of teacher’s licenses every ten years to imposing increasingly stringent testing regimes operated by external providers (94–5). Japanese teachers work longer hours than their OECD counterparts (on average 54 per week), are increasingly burdened with administrative chores, and have suffered salary cuts (90). Meanwhile, a drive in the early 2000s to reduce class sizes has been halted by the current Abe administration, which has instead reduced staff recruitment budgets, causing increasing casualisation (88). The net result has been a decline in teachers’ social status, and an erosion of their agency and professional autonomy. This has been accompanied by a government drive to pressure national universities into merging, abolishing or downgrading their Departments of Education. The Ministry aims to restrict the remit of Educational Studies at most universities to teacher training and technical consideration of improved delivery of gov-

ernment mandates, deliberately diverting resources away from forms of educational research liable to lead to critique of official policy.

In a final chapter, Kitamura discusses ‘safety education’ in the context of ‘Education for Sustainable Development’ – a paradigm that the Japanese Government sought to champion in the early 2000s. As has often been observed, intense concern over safety comes naturally in a country that is regularly ravaged by earthquakes, tsunamis, typhoons and other natural disasters. Kitamura emphasises the need for a ‘comprehensive approach to safety’ encompassing issues ranging from traffic safety to response to natural disasters. He notes how the Great East Japan Earthquake of March 11, 2011 intensified debate over ‘disaster education’ in Japan. However, the focus here on how teachers, parents, schools and communities deal with various threats to safety (and prepare students to do so) overlooks the role of government and corporations in imperilling the safety of citizens. If the nuclear ramifications of the 2011 disaster taught us anything, it is that an arrogant, complacent and unaccountable bureaucracy ranks amongst the greatest threats to public safety. A comprehensive approach to safety education must therefore involve empowering young people as active, critical citizens, ready and able to hold the authorities to account. Indeed, in his concluding ‘Postscript’, Kitamura invokes John Dewey’s emphasis on the importance of schooling in cultivating democratic consciousness and active citizenship, and explicitly critiques the ‘functionalist’ conception of education that still dominates public discourse in Japan.

This is therefore an immensely valuable and thought-provoking contribution to the literature in English on education in contemporary Japan. However, it falls short of its claim to ‘comprehensiveness’ particularly in its analysis of the political and ideological context of education. In the Foreword, Kodama alludes to the transformation of the global political climate heralded by the advance of nationalist populism in Donald Trump’s USA or ‘Brexit’ Britain (v) – countries that have long served as key reference points for Japanese elites. But this volume barely acknowledges the pioneering role of Shinzo Abe’s Japan in this global surge towards inward-looking nationalism. Chapter 11 by Ryoko Tsuneyoshi on the ‘multicultural’ in Japanese society comes closest to addressing, and challenging, the profoundly chauvinistic conceptions of national identity and Japan’s global role that inform public policy on education and much else – themes which she has analysed extensively and trenchantly elsewhere. However, the crucial links between education, resurgent nationalism and Japan’s dysfunctional relationship with its Asian neighbours are hardly touched upon here; the discussion of language education, for example (in Chapter 13 by Yoshifumi Saito), is entirely concerned with English language teaching. Even by East Asian standards, foreign language educational in Japan is extremely narrow; vanishingly few secondary study Korean or Chinese at school. In tacitly taking this situation for granted, the authors reflect the extremely constrained nature of public and scholarly debate over relations with Japan’s ‘near abroad’. But for the sake of Japan and the wider region, a radical rethinking of education’s role in preparing young Japanese to interact with their closest neighbours is urgently called for.