The recent controversy over excluding North Korean schools from the government’s tuition-waiver programme has brought to the fore the issues of educational inequalities and marginalisation of people in our society. Occasionally, we are reminded that the right to equality before the law remains fragile. This particular case showed that it is quite susceptible to diplomatic or political antagonisms and interventions. The controversy began after a state minister suggested the exclusion of the schools on account of North Korea’s nuclear and missile programmes and abductions of Japanese citizens. Since then, not a few people and organisations both at home and abroad have raised concerns, claiming that this issue should be considered from the perspective of equal educational opportunity for all students irrespective of their backgrounds.

In an international assessment of its implementation of human rights, Japan cannot expect to be a high-flyer. Despite the periodic warnings and recommendations issued by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, Japan has taken only limited measures to prevent and eliminate discrimination against the Burakumins, Okinawans, Ainu people, foreign residents, descendants of Korean and Chinese immigrants, and other minority groups living in Japan. There is an obvious contrast between the national reactions towards international alerts of unrealised human rights and the nation’s declining academic standards.

The concerns of the UN Committee were shared by the authors of the papers in this volume. In particular, the authors who contributed to PART II—entitled *Educational Inequalities and Marginalized Groups*—covered almost the same ground as the UN Committee, perhaps with the

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significant addition of mistreatment of Amerasians in Okinawa. Moreover, they presented more subtle pictures of educational inequalities and discriminations that these and other marginalised groups have been facing; for example, diverse experiences of schooling among the Burakumin and the “treating equally” approach adopted by schools that have arguably resulted in the ‘included and marginalized at the same time’ (p.170) type of discrimination. Overall, the chapters in PART II tell us that the sufferings of the marginalised groups are to no small extent due to the unwillingness of the State to tackle the problems. The State should have done more or acted differently to ensure the implementation of human rights. Furthermore, action is still required of the State. These messages echo the UN Committee’s concerns. However, exactly what the State should have done and should do now is a difficult question to answer.

It seems to me that this question underpins the entire present volume. The chapters in Part I entitled Policy, Finance, and National Reforms give insightful accounts of the interactions between both global and national socio-economic changes and education reforms that have been witnessed in the last two decades or so. For example, after the economic crisis in the 1990s and 2000s, the ‘ideology of merit-based educational attainments’ (p.197), together with the myth of middle-class Japan, has been diminishing. This has resulted in the destabilisation of the Japanese hierarchical and competitive school system as well as the individual motivation to learn. In response, Japan has been introducing a plethora of education reforms. However, these reforms are often riddled with contradictions and have unintended unfavourable consequences. Furthermore, many students—particularly those from marginalised groups—and teachers have found themselves in a more disadvantaged position, while the highly stratified and exclusive nature of schooling has survived almost intact.

As Gordon and LeTenrde state, the ideology of merit-based educational attainments has been promoted by the government. It has helped to hide the real problems with Japanese schooling, but global and national socio-economic changes have brought them to the surface. Therefore, the question of “what the State should not do” as well as “what the State should do” is a significant issue for us to address if we are to solve the real problems with our schooling system, including inequalities and discrimination. This is really a difficult question. However, a formulation of its answer can be seen in Fujita’s distinction between self-realisation (a value to be realised in our daily activities) and efficiency, equality, and kyosei (values to be institutionally secured).

The collection of works for this volume originates from an international conference on the future of Japanese education held on 8 April 2006 at the University of California, Berkeley. Eight renowned scholars from Japan were invited to make presentations, namely, Mamoru Tsukada, Akira Sakai, Yoshiro Nabeshima, Haruhiko Kanegae, Taeyoung Kim, Naomi Norii, and the two Japanese editors of this volume. Their papers were subjected to elaborate revisions and redactions until they were formed into the present collection, together with introductory and concluding chapters and commentary by George A. Devos, Harumi Befu, and the two non-Japanese editors.

In their introductory chapter, Gordon and LeTenrde state that as foreign observers, they should comprehend the issues facing Japan as the Japanese see them (p.2) if they are to understand how Japanese society and its schooling will respond to their challenges. My own assessment is that this aim was to a great degree fulfilled. So what is the next step for collaborative scholarship between non-Japanese and Japanese research communities?

Needless to say, Japanese scholars are interested in the role that education currently plays in other societies. For example, the nature and workings of the NCLB (No Child Left Behind) Act
in the US has been attracting our attention. It is also interesting to note that according to some commentators, schools in the US are now more segregated than they were in the late 1960s (Orfield and Lee, 2007). Perhaps we need another volume so that we can understand these and other issues as the Americans see them. Only by having this kind of dialogue will we be able to embark on more fruitful collaborative and international research. Certainly, this volume is a cornerstone for this type of endeavour.

Lastly, for the benefit of prospective readers, I will reproduce the contents of the book below.

Introduction

*June A. Gordon and Gerald LeTendre*

Views from the Japanese Side: Challenges to Japanese Education

*Takehiko Kariya*

Part I Policy, Finance, and National Reform

1. Whither Japanese Schooling?
   Educational Reform and Their Impact on Ability Formation and Educational Opportunity
   *Hidenori Fujita*

2. The End of Egalitarian Education in Japan?
   The Effects of Policy Changes in Resource Distribution on Compulsory Education
   *Takehiko Kariya*

3. Education Stratification: Teacher Perspectives on School Culture and the College Entrance Examination
   *Mamoru Tsukada*

   *Akira Sakai*

PART II Educational Inequalities and Marginalized Groups

5. Invisible Racism in Japan: Impact on Academic Achievement of Minority Children
   *Yoshiro Nabeshima*

6. Schooling for Buraku Women: Life Histories in Eastern Japan
   *Haruhiko Kanegae*

7. The Education of Zainichi Koreans and Their Identity
   *Taeyoung Kim*

8. The Education of Minorities in Japan: Voices of Amerasians in Okinawa
   *Naomi Noiri*

PART III Reflections on Forces Affecting the Future of Japanese Education

9. Challenges to Japanese Education: Concluding Thoughts
   *George A DeVos*

10. Societal and Cultural Context of Educational Issues
    *Harumi Befu*

11. A New Policy Context for Schooling in Japan
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