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The ebb and flow of Japanese educational reform

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Abstract

Through analysis of Japanese educational reform this paper draws attention to key historical and cultural aspects of Japan's modern educational system. Links are drawn to the influence socio-political transformations have had on the Japanese educational systems within three periods of radical reform beginning with the Meiji restoration in 1871, moving onto the Occupation led reforms after the Second World War and concluding with a analysis of contemporary neo-liberal reforms. The paper argues that one of most important aspects to emerge from the antecedence of contemporary Japanese education is the manner in which reform impacts on educators who have been directed to perform and conduct themselves in ways that fundamentally alter traditional Japanese work/cultural practices. The paper aims to introduce Japanese educational reform to a new readership while also providing a source of analysis directed towards the impact of global educational reform outside Western contexts.

Introduction

This paper provides an overview of several periods of major Japanese educational reform. The paper begins by unpacking the historical context of Japan's modern educational system and in doing so touches upon critical periods of national political and social restructuring. Links are drawn between the manner in which socio-political transformations mold educational systems and have thus fashioned the very fabric of the nation. Analysis within this paper is restricted to three periods of radical reform beginning with the Meiji restoration in 1871, moving onto the Occupation led reforms after the Second World War and concluding with a analysis of contemporary neo-liberal reforms. The paper argues that one of most important aspects to emerge from the antecedence of contemporary Japanese education is the manner in which reform impacts on educators who have been directed to perform and conduct themselves in ways that fundamentally alter traditional Japanese work practices. As this paper will be published in both Japanese and English, it aims not only to introduce Japanese educational reform to a new readership but also provide a source of analysis directed towards the impact of global educational reform outside Western contexts.

English language accounts of the Meiji and Occupation reforms have a long tradition of producing distinctive accounts of the Japanese educational system that are grounded in a subjective, yet influential discourse that emphasizes the uniqueness of Japanese education and its inherent cultural links to the social, intellectual and political. Both the Meiji and Occupation postwar reforms are central to most English language accounts of Japanese education for they position the ideological and structural determinants generated from such periods of reformation as crucial to subsequent periods of Japanese prosperity and even paradigmatic shifts in the Japanese psyche. This paper however, positions Japanese educational reform as a systemic structural battle over the contested discursive contradiction surrounding the degree to which reform can genuinely truly erode an inflexible entrenched bureaucracy. The main sections of the paper examine such tensions within the context of the Meiji reforms beginning in 1871, the Occupation reforms at the end of the Second World War and the more recent Nakasone initiated reforms beginning in the 1980s and later morphing into broader neo-liberal patterns evident across broad Western contexts.

The Meiji Reforms

By far the most common starting point used in an analysis of modern Japanese education is the Meiji restoration, which brought to an end the Edo Period lasting from 1600-1860. This seminal event in Japanese history brought with it enormous social and economic change that cemented in place key ideological and political frameworks enabling the unification of authority back under the symbolic control of the Japanese Emperor. The Meiji Restoration marks Japan's transition to modernity and is characterized by a fixated desire to learn from existing Western political and technocratic systems. In terms of Japanese education, the Meiji Restoration provides a clear chronological marker of fundamental bureaucratic transformation as evidenced most dramatically through the establishment of the Ministry of Education (*Monbusho*) in 1871 and the promulgation of the Fundamental Code of Education (*Gakusei*) the following year in 1872. Together, these principal changes to education provided the foundation for the gradual systematization of content and teaching method and the blending of the two previous systems of fief schools for the ruling elite (*Hankō*) and smaller Buddhist run schools for the general population (*Terakoya*) (Linicome 1991).

A significant consequence of the Meiji reform was the development of nation-wide standards that weakened of the previous decentralized prefectural system. Roesgaard (1998) argues that the motivating factor in a push for a centralized system was the desire to unify the people – and therefore the nation – by instilling a compliant notion of ethical behavior. Nishi, along similar lines, maintains the core question embedded in the socio-political and historical context of the period

centered on “what role should the national educational system perform for the new imperial regime committed to building a new Japan?” (Nishi 1982, p.12). Compulsory education came to be viewed as the most effective means of generating nationalism in the light of what Shimahara (1979) and Beauchamp (1978) argue to be a sense of urgency and uncertainty derived from perceived domestic and foreign threats. From its inception, the Monbusho undertook three discrete lines of analysis with the first being to investigate the characteristics of the existing national educational system. The second scrutinized existing Western models of education so that a new Japanese domestic model could be designed, and the third, established government controlled schools where curriculum research and training could occur (MEXT 2007). For the first time in Japanese history education was interpreted as a tool in the push to modernize the nation, a point confirmed by the then Minister of Education Mori Arinori (1885-1889); “Our country must move from its third class position to second class, and from second class to first: ultimately to the leading position among all countries of the world. The best way of doing this is [by laying] the foundations of elementary education.” (Cited in Hood 2001, p. 17).

In just a one-year period following the Gakusei of 1872, 12,500 primary schools were established. Within the next five years the number of schools doubled to a figure not surpassed until the 1960s. Elementary school attendance subsequently rose from only 28 percent of school age children in 1873 to over 50 percent in 1883 and surpassed 96 percent in 1906 (Japan’s National Commission for UNESCO 1966). In addition to rapid reform at the level of educational policy, was the parallel need to develop some kind of systemic mechanism to train teachers who would be able to implement an emerging national curriculum. To this end, the Monbusho established the first ‘Normal School’ in Tokyo in July 1872 based on American principles of elementary school instruction (MEXT 2007). Importantly, this and subsequent normal schools, served as the earliest sites of teacher training while also providing a testing ground for prescribed national instructional goals, hours and textbooks (MEXT 2007).

The Occupation Reforms

The second period of major reform occurred directly after Japan’s defeat in 1945 and in a similar fashion to the earlier Meiji reforms education was again positioned as central to a wide raft of socio- political change. It is critical to note however, that in contrast to the Meiji reforms where Japanese policy makers effectively ‘borrowed’ from a number of Western educational models, the Occupation led reforms for the most part controlled by the United States, effectively transplanted an American paradigm aimed at decentralization, democratization and demilitarization (Hood 2001). Nishi (1982, p.143) goes as far as to argue that the political and ethical undercurrents of the Macarthur sanctioned reformation was far from neutral for the “American authorities demanded there be no nationalism, no militarism and no communism in Japanese education [and] they indoctrinated the Japanese incessantly”. Although both Kobayashi (1979) and Komiya et al. (1988) make the point that having their educational system politicized was nothing new to the Japanese, the occupation reforms were “a saturation type operation intended to affect all aspects of Japanese culture, with the consequences that would survive the eventual signing of a peace treaty” (Kobayashi 1979, p.181). Importantly SCAP (Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers) chose to retain many of the mechanisms of the Japanese bureaucracy and although responsibility for overseeing educational reform was delegated to the Eight Army based in Yokohama, the basic structure of the Monbusho remained intact and unchanged due to an assumption that:

The reform of Japanese society should be accomplished by the Japanese people themselves; that SCAP should not impose a blueprint and that the function of General Headquarters and the Army of Occupation was not to govern Japan, but to supervise the efforts of the Japanese people to reform themselves and their society. (SCAP 1948, vol.1 p.136).

There appears to have been wide agreement at the time that the pre-war educational system had been instrumental in creating what Beauchamp (1991b, p.29) describes as “an aggressive military dictatorship”. Maeda, the first post-war education minister, in his inaugural speech proposed a major restructure of the ministry into five new divisions and also introduced the seminal *Shin Nippon Kensetsu no Kyoiku Honshin* (Educational Plan for Building a New Japan). At the time Maeda stressed the need to wipe out “militarism, fostering culture and scientific thinking, promoting moral sincerity and love of peace, and thereby build a new nation of culture and high moral standards and contribute to peace and progress of the world”. (Monbusho Digest Box 41 date unmarked).

Ward and Sakamoto (1987) maintain that SCAP was heavily dependent on existing bureaucratic structures to effectively revolutionize the State and hence the Allied Occupation overall, became somewhat an indirect occupation in that the government of Japan not only survived defeat, but also continued its normal administrative affairs of state. The major educational accomplishments of SCAP include the censoring of texts, the development of a co-educational 6-year elementary, 3-year junior high, 3-year senior high and 4-year university system with much greater curriculum flexibility. SCAP failed however, to realize that although it is a relative simple exercise to change the institutional functionality, it is a far more difficult undertaking to change the attitudes, values and behavioral patterns that underpin them. Beauchamp (1991) for example concludes the reforms implemented towards the end of the occupation were relatively successful, although Hood (2001) cautions that it is necessary to weigh them up against their impact after the Allies withdrew in 1952. Indeed Hood goes as far as to propose that similar to the;

Meiji reforms, the initial phase of dramatic reforms was followed by a period of re-examination, and the system was ‘re-Japanised’. For the problem was that the new system was based on many ideas that were deeply rooted in the American democratic model but were dysfunctional when transported to the Japanese context. (Hood 2001, p.20)

The point must be stressed that many changes were made to the SCAP initiated reforms in the post 1952 period, particularly in relation to the changing political climate of mid-1950s, rise of militant *Nikkyoso* (Japan Teachers Union) and the *Zengakuren* (National Federation of Students' Self-Government Organization) (see Burnett 2004).

Contemporary Reforms

The final phase of Japanese educational reform began with Prime Minister Nakasone's initiated reforms in the mid 1980s and later merged with Prime Minister Koizumi's reforms of the 2000s. Central to both was the notion that although Japan's educational system, designed after the Second World War had been instrumental in allowing Japan to develop into an economic superpower, the educational system was increasingly under attack by business leaders who asserted it lacked creativity, was overtly standardized and did not possess a requisite component of internationalism (Muta 2000, Goodman 2005). The formation of the council or *Rinkyōshin* (*Ringi Kyoiku Shingiai*) is argued by Hood (2001) to have been “largely and extension of Nakasone ... and consistent with his own ideologies” (p.1). The factors leading to creation of The National Council on Educational Reform in 1984 were multiple, although a major factor was the radical decrease in birth rates, which saw a drop in the population aged between 0-14 from 24.3% in 1975 to 13.6% in 2005 (Statistics Bureau, MIC 2007). The impact of this population decline clearly placed enormous pressure firstly on elementary school enrollments and later on middle, high school and the higher education sector.

Within the historical context of this period, it is clear that educational reform was interwoven into the broader Nakasone intellectual perspective and was connected to both broader structural economic reforms within the Japanese economy and an increasing willingness for Japan to exert

geopolitical influence. Hood (2001) in a seminal analysis of this period of Japanese educational reform moves the direction of analysis away from previous investigations such as Schoppa (1991) who construed the success of reform in a more holistic manner (i.e., one embodying the absolute execution of government guidelines). Hood makes the point that the implementation of both Meiji and Occupation reforms were far from seamless events, with both stretching over many years. Hood also maintains that in the case of the Nakasone reforms it is possible to see the speed in which key areas such as internationalism quickly emerged and provide evidence of the rapid success of the newly formed Rinkyōshin. Within the historical context of the 1980s however, with the Japanese economic and political power rapidly increasing, it is not surprising that the Nakasone inspired ‘*Atarashii Kokusaika*’ or ‘New Internationalization’ attracted wide spread criticism from Japan’s Asian neighbors. The focus of this condemnation was the link to Japan’s military history and the perceived risks associated a form of nationalism that was increasingly channeled through the medium of culture.

It is important to note that the Nakasone initiated reforms of the 1980s and 1990s provided progression for the subsequent reforms of Koizumi beginning in 2001 and facilitated Japan’s ability to map their reform agenda to neo-liberal oriented broader national economic and industrial policies. The legacy of Nakasone’s reforms are particularly apparent in relation to notions of liberalization inherent in reports such as the Standards for the Establishment of Universities 1991, Central Council for Education 1998, and the more recent Koizumi directed councils targeting education such as the Council for Science and Technology Policy, Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy and Council for Regulatory Reform (Yonezawa, 2003). Another legacy of the Nakasone reforms is that they provided for the first time clarification of roles of national, prefectural and local governments and in doing so provided a technocratic roadmap to embed structural transformation into practice. This transformation includes a move to a five-day school week, the promotion of a skills/outcomes based curriculum, a liberalized higher education market, the promotion of lifelong learning, an emphasis on addressing juvenile delinquency or *ijime* (bullying) and the restructuring of the national entrance examination system long termed *juken jigoku* or examination hell. It is possible to argue that the cornerstone of the Nakasone led reforms centered on notions of deregulation for the Council maintained that the emphasis on competition should be between the schools and universities rather than between individual students attempting to gain entrance to these institutions. Although the notion of market-based competition as a motivator of improved educational standards and reduce government costs has become a lasting theme within the subsequent neo-liberal reforms of the 1990s and 2000s, it is important to note this grew surprisingly from notions of liberalization tied to the core notions of ‘individualism’ via increased freedom of choice and flexibility for students.

Reform and contemporary issues in Japanese Education

Given the current global context where regional economic and social interconnectivity is increasing, it is not surprising that Japan has experienced a reform agenda that shares many commonalities to that experienced in Western settings. Hence, similar to nations such as England, the United States and Australia, contemporary educational reform in Japan is more and more positioned as a site where broader political and economic reforms intersect and at times clash with a range of political, economic and socio-ideological positions. Although there are many different aspects to the worldwide neo-liberal reforms, Western educational contexts do offer a window to patterns of transformation that will potentially occur in Japan. This final section of the paper engages in a broader discussion connected to the impact of reform on educational practitioners and critiques the prospective outcomes of the neo-liberal Japanese reforms. In particular, this final section focuses on alterations to established patterns of educational governance and specifically how new emerging

forms of authority interact with established discourses within the higher education sector (for a more detail analysis within Western contexts see for example Marginson 1997, 2005).

Although discussion of contemporary educational change in Japan is linked to a national corporatist reform agenda, prevailing critique within Japan centers on the three broad areas of 1) falling enrollments, 2) legislated curriculum reform and 3) budgetary constraint. Importantly, within the popular press, education is repeatedly singled out as requiring reorganization. This is also a recurring theme within Western contexts, a point touched upon by Hargreaves who concludes that “few people want to do much about the economy, [however] everyone – politicians, the media and the public alike – wants to do something about education” (1994, p.5). This paper argues that contemporary educational reform in Japan must be positioned within a unique historical context that is characterized by long periods of stability followed by radical structural reforms over condensed periods of time. The reforms must also be weighed against the fact that schools and universities have historically been constrained in their ability to react quickly to change due to the fact they have long been administered by a centralized state educational system – the result of which has produced a lack of suitably trained or experienced staff at the institutional level. It would appear however, that despite of pockets of resistance existing within institutions, the Nakasone and Koizumi led reforms have inevitably lead to new forms of public management and in so doing generated a far greater degree of transparency and clarity at the level of institutional and bureaucratic governance. Neoliberalism within this context is embodied in what Apple (2000) identifies as the convergent themes of privatization, marketisation, performativity and the ‘enterprising individual’. In addition to Apple’s four broad groupings, this paper argues that it is possible to observe the undercurrents of a push for smaller government, flexibility, competition, privatization and deregulation which have fundamentally altered the national education agenda (for more detail in the Australian context see Blackmore 2002 and Bullen, Robb & Kenway 2004). In its most simplistic form, contemporary Japanese neoliberal reforms appear predestine to produced an educational system that is increasingly reliant on “outcomes” and the establishment of new ways of auditing and verifying such outcomes. In short, Japanese educators will be increasingly measured, audited and assessed within the context of their research, their teaching and their day-to-day administration.

Possibly one of the most graphic examples of reform can be found in relation to funding, especially where new models overtly establish and encourage conditions of uncertainty so as to force increased performance, flexibility and competition (Bourdieu, 1998). This point represents the core discursive contradiction that although agencies such as *Monbukagakusho* (formally the *Monbusho* or Ministry of Education) increasingly interpret their provision of funds as a qualitative public investment, the ministry subsequently attempts to quantifiably gauge the return on this investment via outcomes. In the Australian context this same process can be argued as inherent in the Federal Government instigated the Research Quality Framework or RQF, which is argued, to be the “basis for an improved assessment of the quality and impact of publicly funded research and an effective process to achieve this” (DEST 2006). The impact of world wide models linking educational funding to both impact and quality cannot be understated and it is the position of this paper that such radical change in funding models holds the potential to have a much greater influence on teacher education than it has on other disciplines/faculties that score better on targets, indicators and evaluations used measure and quantify ‘quality’ and ‘impact’. Some such as Bullen et al (2004) maintain it is a neoliberal desire to manage and control the production and dissemination of educational research that has created a discursive shift in the very forms of education research conducted, while Marginson and Considine (2001, p.370) go so far as to suggest that the academy in general has, “moved from its broad role in public culture and its functions in raising the level of participation of citizens to a new orthodoxy that favors business values and income generation”.

The experiences of contracting numbers of full-time staff within educational institutions in the West appears to be replicated in Japan with initial data indicating a single national Tokyo based education university reduced the number of overall academics from 378 on May 1st 2001 to 365 on May 1st 2006. Importantly the funding for this same university is now based on a figure of only 253 academic staff resulting in not only a blanket ban on the hiring of new staff, but an overall reduction in salary of all staff within the institution. The annual research budget attached to each academic profile has also dropped considerably from a previous 400,000 Japanese yen (approx \$4000 AUD) to the current figure of 200,000 Japanese yen (approx \$2000 AUD). Although 52 academic staff will retire within this same university before 2011, it is not yet clear if these staff can be replaced due to the current restrictions placed on the hiring of full-time staff by the Ministry. One of the most contentious issues currently being discussed are changes to the National University wage system which has historically been based on seniority. New salary scales based on performance are already planned, although the full details of exactly how such scales will be derived are yet to be agreed upon. Clearly, current policy direction will significantly change funding with all national universities in Japan being forced to reduce their overall operating budget by 1% per year from 2007 to 2012. Although education oriented universities will see their funding cut due to the fact that the reduction is to be applied to all national universities, in reality they will in all likelihood be additional funds for research oriented university such as Tokyo and Kyoto Universities that will allow such research intensive universities to increase overall funding.

Although competition has existed historically amongst Japanese educational institutions, it is likely that competition will become more localized extending to the institutional level itself. Competition at this level exists between faculties, disciplines and even between individuals engaged in what Bourdieu terms the absolute reign of neo-liberal flexibility where, a “Darwinian world emerges – it is the struggle of all against all, at all levels of the hierarchy, which finds support through everyone clinging to their job and organization under conditions of insecurity, suffering and stress” (Bourdieu 1998, p.2). Notably, Bourdieu goes on to propose that this struggle “would not succeed so completely without the complicity of all the precarious arrangements that produce insecurity and of the existence of a reserve army of employees rendered docile by these social processes that make their situations precarious, as well as by the permanent threat of unemployment” (Bourdieu 1998, p.2). Given that all competitive environments produce winners and losers, this paper suggests that teacher education will not manage well as there is already evidence of the beginnings of an overall disinvestment in education across the Higher Education sector in Japan.

Conclusion

This paper has provided an overview of educational reform in Japan and has drawn links between the manner in which socio-political transformations have not only generated new educational systems but subsequently fashioned the very fabric of the nation. The paper began by examining the historical imperatives and major socio-political influences that led to the emergence of structured schooling in Japan beginning with the Meiji restoration in 1871. The analysis then moved on to the Occupation led reforms after the Second World War and concluded with a analysis of contemporary neo-liberal reforms. This paper has restricted analysis to the most important implications of educational reform and has argued that educational practitioners must now perform in ways that have fundamentally altered their traditional work practices. Japanese education it would appear is increasingly located within the realm of neo-liberal political and organizational discourses that sustain and reproduce distinctive ideologies at a symbolic and practical level. The term performativity is an encompassing notion that touches upon the many aspects in which reform and change have altered the way educators engage with their work at both the institutional and individual levels (Luke 1992). Performativity in this context, is a term used to encapsulate the logic

of an organizational culture that requires money be only spent where measurable returns can be achieved and if your work cannot be measured – then it is not worth doing. It is hoped that the foundation for critique used within this paper is uniquely suited to an examination of the present situation in Japan for it openly challenges the prevailing discourses of surveillance and measurement inherent within educational management. Implicit in the paper is the belief that teacher educators can only 'know' and 'understand' to the extent that they 'problematize' the natural, cultural and historical reality in which they are immersed. Clearly the educators must adapt to the reform agenda, however if reformation becomes merely enacting a legitimatizing role, in which educational institutions mediate the social, organizational and ideological logic of neoliberal reform, then the opportunity for an exploratory critique of the crisis facing Japanese education will be lost.

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