

Educational Change in Japan: School Reforms

N. KEN SHIMAHARA

Rutgers University

This chapter explores Japan's education reforms in the 1980s and 1990s. The present school system was built to promote Japan's industrialization, and has now become obsolete. The thrust of education reform over the past decade has been how to diversify schools away from uniformity and rigidity. Strategies include: introducing new curricula, implementing innovative high schools, and increasing the autonomy of universities to improve curriculum, teaching and research.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores Japan's education reforms in the 1980s and 1990s. Many of the reform initiatives in the last decade laid the groundwork for continued campaigns to overhaul schools in the 1990s. The main purpose of the chapter is to highlight major changes in Japanese education that have been occurring for the past decade.

Formal education is a function of society, and, although it is a conservative cultural agent, it gradually changes in response to societal demand. Japan underwent two sweeping school reforms since the Meiji Restoration, which repudiated Tokugawa feudalism in 1868, and ushered in the modern era. The first comprehensive reforms occurred in 1872, when Japan laid out a national school system in which elementary education became compulsory. It was a bold and progressive system, largely copied from the one current in France. The modern Japanese school system was perfected by 1890 through a series of overhauls and expansions. The second comprehensive reforms were launched immediately after World War II, and they altered Japan's pre-war school system fundamentally.

Whereas the first education reforms were initiated by Meiji leaders in response to the nation's urgent need to create the human resources required for modernization, the post-war education reforms were imposed and implemented under the close supervision of the Occupation authorities. In early 1946, the United States Mission on Education was invited to Japan to recommend education reforms. Members of the mission used the current U.S. education system as a model for formulating their recommendations. The Education Reform Committee, appointed by the Japanese government as a counterpart to the U.S. mission, played a critical role in reviewing the Americans' recommendations and drafting final recommendations for reforms to be legislated. The recommendations led to the establishment

of a uniform system of co-education that offered six years of elementary, three years of lower secondary, three years of upper secondary, and four years of university education (Rohlen, 1983; Shimahara, 1979; Shinoda, 1979). This post-war education system has remained relatively unchanged until the present time.

Prior to the 1980s, the only major campaign to overhaul the Japanese post-war school system occurred in the early 1970s. In 1967 the minister of education charged his advisory council, the Central Council of Education, to deliberate on school reforms to meet changing social and economic demands. The Council completed its report in 1971, delineating a new vision of Japanese education (Central Council of Education, 1971). The 1960s witnessed industrial and economic expansion unparalleled in Japanese history. In response to the audacious personal "income-doubling plan" launched by the government in 1961, the Ministry of Education assumed centrality in embarking on many new initiatives: implementing a revised curriculum; enhancing science and technical education; implementing national achievement tests; expanding secondary and higher education; and further revising math, science, and technical education (Kinoshita, 1983; Shimahara, 1992; Yamaguchi, 1980). Personal incomes tripled within a decade, as did international trade. Industry was desperate for ever greater numbers of better trained people, and it demanded that education be upgraded. Reflecting the tenor of those times, enrollments in high schools and four-year colleges increased from 57.7 and 9.2 percent, respectively, of all youths in 1960 to 82.1 and 24 percent in 1970, a phenomenal change within a single decade. In short, the reform report was issued at a time when Japan's unparalleled socio-economic transformation was taking place.

Notwithstanding the Central Council of Education's audacious vision, it failed to receive undivided support from within the Ministry of Education and national legislators to implement its entire recommendations. The Ministry of Education was divided into the "internationalists," who aggressively attempted to advance reforms, and the conservative bureaucrats, who rejected radical changes (Schoppa, 1991). Top bureaucrats within the Ministry, who guided the development of Japan's postwar school system, stubbornly defended the status quo. The recommendations were partially implemented in the 1970s, however, and, perhaps more significantly, laid out parameters of reform issues during both the 1970s and 1980s.

EDUCATION REFORM MOVEMENT IN THE 1980s

Reform Issues

Whereas the 1971 reform concentrated on expanding the nation's adaptability to further industrial development and concomitant social change, reformers' principal concerns in the early 1980s were how to deal with negative social consequences of Japan's school system and the advanced industrial and economic structure. The 1980s reform campaign was launched to deal with these problems on a much

broader scale than the 1971 reform initiative, and it was directed by the Prime Minister, who showed a political commitment to education reforms.

One salient issue, among others, that prompted the education reform campaign in the 1980s was the widespread phenomenon of deviant adolescent behavior, including school violence, bullying, refusal to attend school, and other forms of juvenile delinquency (Shimahara, 1986). It peaked at the middle school level across the nation, challenging long-standing norms of society. The Japanese, especially adolescents, were affected by the rise of the information society, changes in family and industrial structures, internationalization, and concomitant centrifugal social forces, all of which contributed to the diversification of adolescent needs and values. Japan became obsessed with adolescents' school violence. The rise of adolescent deviant behavior reflected a lack of fit between a static school system and dynamic social and industrial structures (Amano, 1986).

Another factor that encouraged the reform movement in the 1980s was Japan's concern with its future development (Shimahara, 1986). Japan's long-standing fixation with the West as the source of all things modern has been reversed. The West had served as the model for industrialization since the Meiji Restoration, and during the ensuing century catching up with the West became Japan's coveted national goal. But in the 1970s and 1980s Japanese development gradually shifted from industrialization guided by the "catch-up" ideology to unprecedented technological advancement for which there was no ready-made model. That was an unparalleled historical development for which Japanese government and industry had not adequately prepared (Economic Council, 1983). The education reform movement of the 1980s was in part stimulated by Japan's political concern with technological and scientific development in the next several decades.

Other prominent issues during the education reform movement in the 1980s included: effects of Japan's uniform, egalitarian education on students; negative consequences of overheated competition in university examinations; the need to create strategic plans for life-long learning; and effects on education of the rise of an age of information-intensive society and internationalization (National Council on Educational Reform, 1988; Ministry of Education, 1989).

Above all, the chief problem challenging reformers was to overhaul the uniform education that was becoming dysfunctional in a fast changing society. Uniform education in Japan is a legacy of the Meiji and post-war school systems, which had been highly effective in preparing literate human resources for industrialization during the "catch-up" era. But it was losing its effectiveness in a society, which was demanding diversity, rather than uniformity, in schooling. Reformers saw this to be a primary issue (National Council on Educational Reform, 1988).

Since he became prime minister in 1982, Yasuhiro Nakasone was interested in launching a campaign for education reform. By the spring of 1984 he had become thoroughly acquainted with the critical issues of Japanese education and was ready to move ahead. Preparation of the Bill to establish the National Council on Educational Reforms (NCER) was already under way under his leadership, and the bill passed in the national legislature in the summer of 1984. NCER was a

national task force under direct control of the Prime Minister and completely independent of the Ministry of Education. It had four divisions responsible for education for the 21st century; activating educational functions of society; reforming elementary and secondary education; and reforming higher education. NCER took three years to deliberate on recommendations for school reforms and issued four reports.

Implementation

The Ministry of Education plays a key role in overseeing local authorities' compliance with national standards and policy, while each of the 47 independent prefectural boards of education is charged with educational administration. Under this structure of Japanese educational administration, the Ministry of Education assumed responsibility for creating new policies in response to NCER's recommendations.

Here I will highlight major reform initiatives that the Ministry of Education began implementing in the late 1980s. The first cluster of reforms was focused on improving primary and secondary education. It included: a revision of the primary and secondary curricula to enhance students' adaptability to changing society, the mastery of basic knowledge and skills, and moral education; measures to improve student guidance; initiatives to diversify high school education; and beginning teacher internships and upgrading teacher certification standards.

Among these initiatives, beginning teacher internships were the most coveted program of the Ministry of Education, and substantial national subsidies are provided. Every year this one-year program involves all the beginning public school teachers at the elementary and secondary schools. Its purpose is to improve the quality of teaching and broaden neophyte teachers' perspectives under the supervision of a full-time mentor. Interns are expected to work closely with the mentor to improve a broad range of competence, including teaching, classroom management, and student guidance. They are also required to participate in an out-of-school, inservice program involving workshops, lectures, and observations 30 times a year, which is organized by the inservice education center of the prefectural board of education. Further, a retreat for five days is organized to provide intensive inservice education (Ministry of Education, 1994; Shimahara & Sakai, 1992).

High school restructuring became a pivotal campaign in the 1990s. It will be discussed in some depth in the next section.

The second cluster of initiatives aimed to overhaul higher education (Ministry of Education, 1994). A University Council was created in the Ministry of Education, and its primary charge is to review strategic plans in higher education and make policy recommendations. Following the NCER reports, the University Council formulated specific recommendations to reform all levels of higher education. Implementation of these recommendations is currently under way. These reforms will be explored in the last section.

The third campaign was to enhance an effective life-long learning system. For

this purpose, the Ministry of Education created a Bureau of Life-long Learning to coordinate locally organized adult education, cultural, and sports programs. Further, a law for promoting life-long learning was enacted by the national legislature to provide funding and other support for prefectural-level organizations. The Council on Life-long Learning established by this law in 1992 issued a reform report emphasizing the augmentation of recurrent education, the promotion of volunteer activities, the expansion of students' activities outside schools, and the extension of learning opportunity for adults.

The fourth campaign was to expand international education to stimulate Japan's internationalization: expanding exchange of students with foreign countries; improving Japanese language instruction for foreigners; improving the instruction of foreign languages for Japanese students; and enhancing school programs for Japanese students living overseas.

Thus far I have sketched education reform initiatives in the 1980s. In the next section I will focus on Japan's reform efforts in the 1990s, which ensued from the earlier campaign to overhaul schools.

REFORMS IN THE 1990s

By virtue of the fact that educational change is additive and more often than not spiral, it is slow unless it is imposed as a consequence of war or revolution. As mentioned, Japan's post-war school reform was drastic, because the pre-war system was virtually replaced with an American system. But since then it followed a cumulative and spiral process. School reforms in the 1990s, however, are additive building on the 1980s highly publicized nationwide reform movement. When the National Council on Educational Reform completed the four reform reports, its recommendations appeared to be too ambitious and broad. Moreover, they were even diffuse and general. Concrete reform agendas, however, gradually emerged from the late 1980s and early 1990s. This section will focus on the restructuring of upper secondary and higher education.

High School Structuring

In Japan, compulsory attendance is required only through middle school, and currently 96 percent of middle school graduates are enrolled in high schools. Of these high schools 76 percent are public and only 24 percent are private.

High school education is the most critical stage of schooling in terms of transition to college and employment. High school education has a strikingly lasting impact on adolescents because the most pivotal element of that education is preparation for intense university entrance examinations. These examinations have a dominant influence on high school students' cognitive and motivational orientation toward schooling. More than 30 years ago Vogel (1963), author of *Japan's Middle Class*, noted: