

# ***Japan: Crisis, Public Education and the Role of Teachers***

***by Hidenori Fujita***

**E**ducation in Japan is facing a serious crisis that has emerged against the backdrop of a changing social structure and the eruption of a series of violent incidents in schools. The foundations of education have been shaken to their core and the current educational status quo is being questioned. In my view, the social and policy responses that have been put forward to deal with these problems have actually made them worse. Education reform is being pursued in the form of privatization, commodification and market-oriented tendencies. Guided by neo-liberal ideology while making much of self-determination and self-responsibility, the reforms threaten to reorganize education in such an egotistic and discriminatory manner that the foundations of our civil society may well be eroded. However, in spite of the serious social implications of the problems we face, it is not at all clear that the nature of this crisis is widely understood.

## **QUESTIONING THE DIRECTION OF EDUCATION REFORM**

Since the 1980s, radical educational reforms have been implemented in various countries

around the world, including Japan. In 1984, an Ad-Hoc Council on Education was established as an advisory body to the Japanese prime minister. The council spent three years comprehensively examining school education and produced four reports, upon which a variety of reforms have been based.

In primary and secondary education, the proposed reforms include the introduction of a five-day school week (down from six) and an accompanying major reduction in teaching hours and curriculum content. They also include the introduction of a six-year inclusive junior and high-school program, and the reformation of local education administration, centering on a lifting of the ban on school selection at the elementary and secondary levels. At the high school level, a more diversified and flexible education program has been pursued, with the introduction of comprehensive general education courses, establishment of high schools that issue diploma by units earned and an increased variety of elective courses. Reforms for *higher* education include proposals for diversifying the methods used for administering entrance examinations for universities, more diversified and modernized undergraduate education,

---

more extensive and thorough graduate education in a diversified and flexible system, more effective university administrative management, an improved research environment for universities, and so on.

Among the reforms described above, I support the general direction and content of the reforms proposed for high school and higher education. However, I am extremely critical of the reforms being carried out in elementary and secondary education for three reasons.

First, the reforms being pursued are deceptive. Despite admitting the urgency of dealing with problems of violence, bullying or non-attendance, the proposals are irrational and inappropriate for resolving these issues and threaten instead to institutionalize disparities in educational opportunities. An attempt has been made to deal with a rash of pathological crimes, for instance, by assigning clinical psychologists and counselors to schools. However, this means treating these issues as purely psychological. On the other hand, by introducing an elitist six-year junior high school system and allowing individuals to pick and choose which school to attend, silent approval has been given to prejudicing educational opportunity at the compulsory education level. Such moves will allow the ranking of elementary and secondary schools, and provoke fierce competition for entry into the schools of choice. In discussions for reform of high schools and universities, the harm caused by school ranking and competitive entrance examinations has been consistently criticized. However, these concerns have been groundlessly dismissed and reforms to extend such measures to elementary and secondary schools are a serious possibility.

Second, the elitist, neo-liberal ideology underlining debates about education reform have predictable consequences. Recent arguments for reform are based on neo-liberal inspired ideas that promote principles of self-determination and self-responsibility. They attempt to encourage reorganization by pressing for a free selection system for elementary and secondary schools. Until now,

the overwhelming majority of elementary and secondary schools in Japan have been publicly funded by the locality, apart from a small minority (affecting approximately three percent of the total number of students) of private schools and schools attached to national universities. The residents of the surrounding community have supported each school to allow them to develop in the district. However, by urging the commodification and privatization of education, even in the compulsory stages, the current elitist proposals have shaken the roots of this system.

Third, the reforms do not offer a rational response to the contemporary education needs of a knowledge/information society where education is expected to deliver more tailored content and improve the general level of learning. The tried and trusted method in Japan of cramming knowledge through an egalitarian system of uniform teaching has been singled out as the most problematic aspect of education here. However, reforms have been pushed through without any scientific analysis of the actual performance results of the cramming method. The result is a denial of some of the positive aspects of education in Japan, a driving down of the general level of education and the polarization of scholastic aptitude and levels of individual effort.

The history of Europe and the US demonstrates that as the education system expands there is increasing pressure toward standardization. However, the reforms carried out in Japan since the reports of the Ad-Hoc Council on Education have gone increasingly against this trend, at least for primary and secondary education. We can see this with the current proposals that are geared toward the promotion of open-mindedness and individual character, and nurturing creativity and skills for self-expression. The content of what is being taught has been changed by the introduction of the “time for comprehensive learning.” Added to this is the flexible application of the school catchment area scheme, which has allowed free choice of schools, and the pressure for reforms to diversify, liberalize and privatize education.

---

## CHANGES TO THE FOUNDATIONS OF EDUCATION

Increasing internationalization and globalization, along with an information environment that is becoming increasingly multilateral and diversified, have helped change views of the kind of knowledge that should be taught at schools. The status that schools exclusively enjoyed when they taught “meaningful knowledge” has also declined in proportion to the expansion of the information environment outside of schools, and the development of consumer-driven communication and media industries. In addition, since the 1970s and the emergence of serious problems of violence, bullying and absenteeism by school-children, some people maintain that we are witnessing the near collapse of order

in schools. Furthermore, behavior that stressed sincerity, hard work and harmony with others, and incentives that encouraged good behavior, have declined.

I call these developments changes to the four foundations of education: knowledge, order, meaningfulness and incentive. As society grows more affluent, expanding opportunities have helped higher levels of education become commonplace to the extent that more than 90 percent of students now progress to high school. However, the number of those who cannot keep up has also increased, and high school students, who are often lethargic, indifferent and irresponsible, are dropping out more frequently. The meaning of education and learning has been lost, and incentives for studying have declined.

As the foundations of school education have become unstable, movements in favor of educational reforms in Japan became more prevalent since the 1980s. Unfortunately, the reforms themselves may have contributed to the crisis of the education system, and

therefore we should continue to question them by focusing on the public nature of education. We can do this by asking the following questions:

- 1) *Who should govern and control education?*
- 2) *Who should pay the cost of education?*
- 3) *Who should educate our children?*
- 4) *What kind of civic society should be aimed at?*
- 5) *What level of equal opportunity should be maintained?*
- 6) *At what level should cultural/economic activities be oriented?*

The first three aspects concern issues related to the institutional format of publicly funded education, and to who is responsible and has authority over public education. In other words,

THE REFORMS DO NOT OFFER A RATIONAL RESPONSE TO THE CONTEMPORARY EDUCATION NEEDS OF A KNOWLEDGE/INFORMATION SOCIETY WHERE EDUCATION IS EXPECTED TO DELIVER MORE TAILORED CONTENT AND IMPROVE THE GENERAL LEVEL OF LEARNING

these questions are about institutional and ethical issues concerning the public nature of education. In contrast, the latter three are related to the functions of public education, or issues concerning the existential/functional foundation of the public nature of education.

The governance of education in Japan has been mandated, provided, managed and funded by the state. This fundamental framework has begun to change against the background of declining state finances and the events I have summarized above. The decrease in state control has resulted in deregulation, allowing schools to exercise more discretion, and reforms for more liberal and market-oriented education have been launched. School education is now considered a semi-public asset in economic terms, because of its dual role as a *public* asset for reproducing national culture and society, and a *private* asset that brings differentiating levels of benefit for each individual according to their level of education. The principal of public education, to which Japan subscribes, maintains that education is

---

the indispensable means to achieve equal human rights, although the ultimate right to educate children naturally rests with their parents. At the same time, public education is a necessity because it helps to circumvent parents' prejudice or irresponsibility, and offers a cooperative way of fulfilling the obligation of parents to ensure the optimal education of their children. This author also believes that the responsibility to educate children rests with society, as humans are social beings.

The reforms referred to these days as attempts at *reduced* state control are not, as is claimed, an expansion of governance by residents and teachers but are in fact an expansion of *market control* hand in hand with the development of new bureaucratic controls. I am deeply concerned about the possible disruption of the public education system and the erosion of the foundations of our symbiotic society. The increase in the cost of education born by individuals will widen the disparity of educational opportunity across various groups, particularly at the primary and secondary levels. There are now arguments that information media will come to replace schools, that the obligation to educate children belongs to the private prerogative of parents so that children's rights to education or learning are regarded as being an absolute self-determined right. The people who hold these views insist that the role of schools should be diminished and reorganized while the rights of children and parents for more discretion and selection should be increased.

Compulsory education has been institutionalized to provide a common educational basis for children to acquire the knowledge required of a Japanese citizen. The curriculum consists of basic skills, such as the three R's (reading, writing and arithmetic), civic studies, moral principles, social skills and the ability to make political decisions, among others. The Japanese primary and secondary public schools based on local districts are actually the manifestation of efforts to institutionally ensure that the schools stay open, non-discriminatory and non-exclusive, based upon the idea of civil society and democracy. At the same time, schools must be able to provide

children with opportunities to gain autonomy through self-respect and self-realization, as well as an aptitude for co-existence. Frustration and worries about the poor state of some schools encourages the preference for free selection of schools starting at the elementary and secondary levels. However, such a trend points toward discrimination and exclusion, and is highly likely to close down opportunities for entry into schools that originally stood for open coexistence and cooperation.

Equal educational opportunities must be guaranteed because the ideal of public education is to provide a means to realize equality in human rights and basic children's rights. In an institutional sense, it is based on the fact that school education provides functions such as social selection and distribution, as well as the endowment of a qualification. Allowing more freedom of selection of primary and secondary schools decreases the level of equal educational opportunities. Compulsory education until now has equipped children with basic scholastic aptitudes and the ability to work and live as citizens of Japan. As more people continue to go on to higher education, and our information society becomes increasingly diversified and advanced, compulsory education becomes even more important and must be expected to adapt and change in response. The recent reforms call for the ability to live, think for yourself and educate yourself, all of which are reasonable. However, I believe the core of all these abilities is literacy in a wider sense, which includes basic abilities, such as the three R's, as well as pride and a positive attitude toward social life. One cannot acquire these aptitudes by simply taking it easy. They can only be attained, gradually, through hard work. Unlike Germany and the UK, in Japan positive attitudes and pride are based on differences in abilities and cultural capital. I am apprehensive that the ranking and differentiation of schools may make things worse.

#### EDUCATION REFORM AND THE ROLE OF TEACHERS—WHAT'S NEEDED?

Last, allow me to present my private views

---

regarding the kind of reforms that are truly needed, mainly at the level of compulsory education.

First of all, it is important not to press on with institutional reforms that are unnecessary or may even aggravate the situation. Second, general conditions in schools must be improved so that each school can actively develop its own system. Third, improved conditions for the realization of an open school system are needed.

Primary and secondary education is currently provided as compulsory education, equal and free of charge to all children. The system is open and the opportunity for higher education is accessible to all. Although there may be room for reform in curriculum and administrative management of schools, no other institutional reform is needed.

Regarding the improvement of the environment in the second and third proposals above, it is important to reduce class sizes and increase the discretion of each school. Of course I understand that the financial situation is very tight. However, if education is to be improved in a true sense, among the various institutional reforms proposed, the utmost priority must be given to the reduction of class size from the current level of 40 pupils to a class. In terms of schools' rights of discretion, an environment more deeply rooted in the community where the principal, the vice principal and the teachers can join with parents to build their own schools must be prepared. A variety of policies will help in providing such an environment. For instance, in addition to the full-time staff, a variety of people such as part-time teachers, special lecturers and tutors, involved in schools on a regular basis could be invited to change the organization of schools. School facilities, such

as sports grounds and gymnasiums, could be released to the local community when not in use.

These are institutional reforms. However, it is even more important to recover the trust of schools and teachers. It is true that the decline in trust in teachers has much to do with developments outside of their responsibility and authority. Nevertheless, only teachers can take the lead in restoring trust. I would like to make these final proposals to teachers.

First, teachers should be aware of their role as education professionals and put in their best efforts accordingly. Second, teachers should aim to create an open and flexible classroom where a variety of needs and expectations of children can be met appropriately, and the various conditions posed by many changes in the educational foundations can be effectively dealt with. Third, teachers must strive to improve their skills as education professionals, for instance, by observing each child very carefully to learn about his/her situation, eliminating prejudice and rigidity, and establishing classrooms where tolerance, responsiveness and stability prevail. Fourth, teachers must remember that their work can be successful only when it is performed in a trusting relationship, and to this end, must continue to make schools and teachers' work more open and accessible. And finally, it is extremely important that teachers trust each other and cooperate with each other more.

*Hidenori Fujita is Dean and a professor of the School of Education at the University of Tokyo. He has written numerous articles regarding educational policy and reform. He is currently a member of the National Commission on Educational Reform in Japan. E-mail: hfujita@educhan.p.u-tokyo.ac.jp*