

Introduction

Education is the cheap defense of nations.

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THE ULTIMATE foundation of a nation is the quality of its people. Over the long haul, their diligence and thrift, their creativity and cooperation, and their skill and orderliness compound to shape a nation's level of achievement. Certainly such things as natural resources, great leaders, a talented elite, and astute policies also have a significant influence on the general performance of societies. We regularly study these more apparent considerations, but too often we fail to come to grips with the fundamental issue of the quality of average daily behavior in national populations. International differences in average behavior are indeed difficult to measure and assess. Often they are relegated to the residual category of culture and then essentially ignored. Nevertheless, how well a population performs the basic tasks of social existence when multiplied out day after day, year after year, is the underlying basis and sense of dynamic for key institutions that in turn shape a nation's place among all nations. The historical rise and fall of civilizations, in other words, rests heavily on such assumed matters as socialization, fundamental skills, and general morality. In our modern sophistication, we are prone to discount the significance of these basic issues in analyzing long-term national developments.

Japan is a case in point. A nation pitifully poor in natural resources,

Japan has the highest population density per acre of arable land in the world; nearly all her energy and raw materials must be imported. In this century, she has rarely enjoyed the leadership of strong or brilliant individuals, suffering great destruction in World War II as a result. Japan's bureaucratic elite has established highly effective industrial policies in the postwar period, and her managers have shown great skill in creating efficient economic institutions, but these would have amounted to very little without the crucial ingredient of superb human capital. Crediting Japan's bureaucrats and managers with Japan's success—a success so in fashion today—misses a crucial point. These men could not have produced what has been accomplished only by millions of Japanese working together.

This book is about how that population is being educated and developed, and the results are assessed in comparison with the United States. The quality of a citizenry is the product of a number of basic institutions, most notably the family, religion, and schools. Of these, schools are the most accessible, the most comparable across cultures, and the most responsive to public policy. High schools occupy a particular place in the socialization process. Their students stand at the threshold of adulthood, reflecting the work of parents, teachers, and schools. At the same time, the final steps in shaping a national citizenry are clearly evident in high school education. High schools illustrate the manner and the intensity of the educational effort, and the outcome of that effort is reflected in the conduct of high school students.

In studying high schools, we not only learn what socialization occurs there, but we have an opportunity to gauge its results. Further, as the end point of mass education, high schools reveal the disparity in skills and habits achieved by members of the same generation, thus allowing us to assess the matter of equality. Finally, because adolescent minds present few barriers to difficult ideas, high school is an excellent point along the educational path to take a close look at the meaning of what is taught—the cultural, political, and intellectual implications of the process.

Japan has surpassed the United States in popular education. The two nations lead the industrial world in percentage of young people entering high school (both above 95 percent), yet in Japan high school is not compulsory. Fewer than 75 percent of American youths took high school diplomas in 1980, whereas the Japanese now gradu-

Table 1

Educational Outcome, United States and Japan, for Persons Aged Seventeen in 1974 (in percentages)

	<i>Japan</i> *		<i>United States</i> †	
	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>
Graduated from high school	90	91	73	77
Attended college or junior college	44	32	47	44
Graduated with B.A. or equivalent	39	12	25	24

SOURCES: Data from United States Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Education Division, *Digest of Education Statistics* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1975); and Mombushō, *Waga Kuni Kyōiku Suijun: 1975* (Tokyo: Okurashō Insatsu Kyoku, 1976).

* Figures represent expected outcomes based on 1973 pattern.

† Excludes persons who may attend college or gain degrees more than one year after their age group.

ate 89 percent from high school (Table 1). And, contrary to American experience, the Japanese have not had to seriously sacrifice quality in their extension of a secondary education to nearly everyone. On international tests of both science and math, Japanese mean scores are higher than those of any other country. The degree of variation in ability among Japanese students is also shown to be very low (Tables 2 and 3), meaning that equality of achievement is notable. Such accomplishments must have something to do with the prowess of Japan's workers and the success of her economy. In fact, although the average level of Japanese intellectual skill and knowledge is high, equally noteworthy is the high level of orderliness and diligence in the general population. Education has something to do with the fact that social problems in Japan are small by Western standards. We must understand how Japanese are taught and how they are socialized if we are to gain insight into the underlying strengths of the country.

American secondary education seems to be in perpetual crisis. Test scores have declined and private school enrollments have risen. Demoralization has spread and increasing school violence seems to follow. The goals and institutional will of secondary schools have come into serious question. From decade to decade our priorities

Table 2

Achievement in Mathematics by Thirteen-Year-Olds, 1960–1964

<i>Nation</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Coefficient of Variation</i>
Japan	31.2	.542
Belgium	27.2	.542
Finland	24.1	.411
The Netherlands	23.9	.665
Australia	20.2	.693
England	19.3	.881
Scotland	19.1	.764
France	18.3	.678
United States	16.2	.821
Sweden	15.7	.689

SOURCE: Torstein Husen, ed., *International Study of Achievement in Mathematics: A Comparison of Twelve Countries*, vol. 2 (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1967), p. 22.

shift radically, and the result is a sense of profound contradiction among the many goals of our population.

Rather than making persistent efforts to raise the average level of our human resources, we seem to have resigned ourselves to compensatory technology and other techniques of “foolproofing” our basic production systems by building in the assumption of a low, even declining common denominator. We have become a society with a low expectation of the average citizen. Coping with the human factor in this way creates a vicious circle of declining standards leading to declining expectations. Now a new national administration proposes, in the name of states’ rights and budgetary constraint, to relinquish responsibility for improving the situation. But this is not actually a very significant change. We have, in fact, been liquidating our human capital base for some time.

Given the erosion of the American family and the declining commitment to parenting among the young, the troubles of our schools are all the more alarming. The reader will find the contrast with Japan sobering. I say this not because I intend to hold up Japanese education as an example to be emulated, but because once we are aware of its approach and its achievements, we cannot avoid seeing

Table 3
Achievement in Science by Persons Aged About Fourteen, 1970

<i>Nation</i>	<i>Middle School Sample</i>	<i>Mean Coefficient of Variation</i>
Japan	31.2	.474
Hungary	29.1	.436
Australia	24.6	.545
New Zealand	24.2	.533
Federal Republic of Germany	23.7	.485
Sweden	21.7	.539
United States	21.6	.537
Scotland	21.4	.664
England	21.3	.662
Belgium (Flemish)	21.2	.434
Finland	20.5	.517
Italy	18.5	.551
The Netherlands	17.8	.562

SOURCE: Data from L. C. Comber and John P. Keeves, *Science Achievement in Nineteen Countries* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1973), pp. 159, 108.

ourselves and our problems more clearly. Japanese high schools are a mirror for Americans, but not a model.

Ironically, what the Japanese have accomplished is not much appreciated in Japan. Perhaps public education is a universal scapegoat because expectations are unattainably high, but the fact remains that most Japanese find strong reasons to complain. A powerful leftist teachers' union sees education as creating inequality and serving the interests of the establishment. Parents complain that their children work too hard and worry too much about passing entrance exams. Traditionalists see postwar education as undermining basic Japanese culture and values. There is ample evidence for each of these criticisms.

Foreign observers of Japanese society and education have reflected the Japanese criticisms, especially those centering on the entrance exam competition. Many have echoed the litany of complaints about how exam pressures are responsible for high youth suicide

rates, nervous disorders, and even delinquency. As a result, foreign readers have generally held the opinion that Japanese education is notable for its excesses rather than its accomplishments. Recently, however, a fresh and much more substantial perspective has been introduced by William K. Cummings, a sociologist who has examined elementary education in Kyoto in considerable detail.¹ He concludes that Japanese education is praiseworthy on many accounts, including the high standards achieved in basic education, the quality of instruction offered in the arts and music, the success in teaching orderly behavior and social sensitivity, and the broad equality of opportunity established by the compulsory school system.

I am much impressed by Cummings' arguments, and this book supports his perspective in some key respects. I seriously disagree with him about the overall character of Japanese education through twelfth grade, however. The addition of the secondary school level to the picture Cummings draws greatly alters some of the qualities he finds so appealing. This book argues against his judgments of the overall Japanese accomplishment in terms of both equality and the quality of instruction. It also evaluates the role of the teachers' union from a different perspective. I have aimed at putting the admirable and the objectionable into the same framework, in recognition that they are systematically related in Japanese education.

To capture this complexity and to portray the life within Japanese high schools, I conducted a year's fieldwork (1974-75) in five distinctly different high schools, representing a spectrum from the best to the most troubled schools, in the industrial port city of Kobe. During six to eight weeks at each school, I sat in on classes, interviewed teachers, studied records, and gave out questionnaires. Comparisons of the schools reveal much about the structure of social differences in Japan. And, in turn, the underlying categories, activities, values, and procedures common to all five schools reveal much about Japanese public and educational culture.

Seven years have passed since this period of fieldwork, and I have been back to Kobe several times to check details and follow subsequent developments. The ethnographic present remains 1974-75 so far as my observations are concerned, but I have attempted to update the national statistics to make this book as current as possible.

1. See Cummings (1980).

There have been changes in each of the five schools since 1975, but none has affected significantly the character of Japanese education as described in these pages.

No books or articles in English exist on Japanese high schools, and in Japanese nothing has been published of an observational nature. Documentation is minimal. Japanese scholars take their high schools for granted, and they have not studied the variety. My first objective in these pages must therefore be to describe in some detail what Japanese urban high schools are like. Beside being a necessary and legitimate end in itself, this is the first step in discussing the place of education in Japanese society and contemporary culture.

The plan of this book, then, is to move between the specifics of high schools and the relation of high schools to larger matters. After introducing the five particular high schools in Chapter One, the historical context (Chapter Two) and the social context (Chapters Three and Four) of high school education are considered. The goal is to identify the influences that have shaped high schools. The succeeding four chapters return to examining fundamental patterns of high schooling. Chapters Five through Eight constitute an ethnographic account of the Japanese high school organized around the standard topics of space and time, social organization, politics, and instruction. The goal is to consider general questions about the experience of high school as it shapes Japanese character. Finally, in Chapter Nine, the overall pattern of Japanese adolescence is considered as it is molded by education and as it compares with the American experience. The issues of efficiency, social structural variation, and contemporary culture begin to converge here. In the final chapter, some conclusions are drawn.

The structure of the book can be visualized as resembling two concentric wheels, one large and one small. The patterns of organization and practices that mark high schools are the inner wheel, from which a set of issues and questions is drawn out in separate directions like spokes to the larger wheel of more general sociological and cultural questions. The influence along each spoke is two-directional. Schools are shaped by their social environment and they contribute to it, both. No single thesis governs the arrangement. I view institutions as integral wholes and prefer to view them from many perspectives rather than to shine a single theoretical light on them. This is a matter of taste. My preference is to begin somewhat

naïvely as an anthropologist set down in the midst of institutional life; from there I work back to professional concerns. The largest issues around which I have organized this study are the classic ones of social structure, culture, and national efficiency. Together they allow us to explore the broadest implications of the interrelations between education and society.

Several cautionary remarks are in order about comparisons of Japan and the United States. Whenever possible I have supplied data on American education to sharpen the sense of differences. But the two societies *are* different in some fundamental respects. For example, Japan is not ethnically or racially pluralistic. Pulling isolated statistics out of the two social worlds can be misleading if we forget that any single comparison involves many basic societal differences. My intention is to clarify, not to distort. To achieve this I must ask the reader's alert cooperation in avoiding the pitfalls of jumping to unwarranted conclusions. Statistical comparisons from different countries, moreover, rarely stand on precisely the same definitional and data collection base. Only when the statistical differences are sizable have I felt justified in presenting them and interpreting their significance.

In reading about another society, our interest is stimulated largely by contrasts with our own. This is perfectly natural and legitimate. Yet when we seek answers for our problems, we are likely to oversimplify the foreign situation and draw lessons before the many complicating factors are fully appreciated. We know that cause and effect are rarely a simple calculation in our own society, but the same level of sophisticated understanding is rarely established about other societies. This is a point worth remembering.