Converging Paths or Ships Passing in the Night? An 'English' Critique Japanese School Reform.

Article for Comparative Education

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In the traditional typologies of comparative education, Japanese and English (and Welsh) education may be seen as polar opposites. Japanese schooling has traditionally been centralized, uniform and relatively inflexible in its structures and procedures. English schooling, by contrast, has been typically rather decentralized, emphasising institutional independence, curriculum and school diversity and professional autonomy. The one system evolved historically out of the nation-building efforts of the state, both in its late nineteenth century origins and in the post-war period, and has consequently been unambiguously 'state-led' and 'national' in its forms and objectives; the other evolved out of the liberal and voluntarist traditions of Victorian Britain, which was reluctant to recognize the claims of the state and nation in education. Liberal traditions, which persisted into the next century, celebrated freedom and variety in education; educators were frequently resistant to central government 'interference' in education and ideally sought to place the individual pupil and teacher at the centre of the schooling process (Green, 1990).

In both countries, naturally enough, policy-makers and educationalists have looked to the other as a foil and as a benchmark for comparison. They have done this either as a way of highlighting the uniqueness and strengths of their own national system, or, more often, as a way of getting the measure of what they think their system lacks. Occasionally, policy-makers will even use advocacy of practices in the 'other' country
as legitimation for new policies in their own country (Phillips, 1989).

England was not one of the European countries which exercised a great formative influence on the early

development of the Japanese national system. Nevertheless, Japan has had copious scholars of English education, many of whom have long admired the so-called ‘child-centred’ traditions of English pedagogy as well as the relative decentralisation of administration represented by the system of partnership schools, and central and local government which prevailed during the post-war decades (Kobayashi, 1976). English scholars took less note of Japanese education until the era of Japanese economic ascendancy, unlike in America where research have been relatively prolific in the field (Ichikawa, 1989). In recent years, however, the subject has received sustained attention, not least because of Japan’s prominence in international evaluations of educational achievement.

Some British educators have admired the Japanese system for its relative uniformity and consistency of standards, factors deemed responsible for the high attainments of the majority of children in the basic areas of language, maths and science. In England and Wales, by contrast, standards have traditionally varied considerably between regions, and individual schools and students, leading to a growing concern in recent years about the ‘long tail of underachievers’ (Green and Steedman, 1993).

A curious situation is now emerging. Japanese policy-makers are increasingly criticizing the very aspects of Japanese education which foreigners have most admired - its relative homogeneity, egalitarianism and orderliness. These are now seen as so many rigidities and barriers to creativity and personal growth amongst children. They wish instead - or so they say - to adopt practices which have been traditionally associated with England and Wales : school and curriculum diversification, parental choice, school autonomy and individualised teaching methods. Education in England and Wales, in the meantime, has moved some way towards Japanese practices in centralising control over standards with the introduction of national curricula and testing and through central reform of its examination system. The new Labour Government is engaged in a determined effort to raise standards of achievement in the basics and to do something about underachieving schools and pupils. Obliging schools to follow new guidelines on school attendance, homework and literacy teaching is part of this apparently rather ‘Japanese’ process. Current policy interest in the teaching of moral education and civics and methods of

interactive whole class teaching also suggest a recognition, tacit or otherwise, of East Asian strengths in these areas (Reynolds and Farrel, 1996).

These policy cross-overs - and the changing perceptions of the 'other' which accompany them - prompt a number of obvious questions for comparative educationalists. Are the Japanese and English education systems - traditional antipodes in the comparative typologies of education systems - beginning to converge, perhaps towards some kind of educational golden mean? Or are they passing each other like ships in the night, each one heading blindly towards the past which the other has rejected? Can either system learn from the other's achievements and mistakes? Do the policy-makers in either country understand the contextualities which make certain policies and practices work (or not work) in the other system and which render them intractable to policy borrowing?

What follows in this article is primarily an account from an 'English' standpoint of past and current trajectories in Japanese education. That is to say it attempts to analyse Japanese education in its own context but with the benefit of some historical knowledge of what has worked and not worked in the English and Welsh context. The analysis does not aspire to a full set comparative judgements. However, as one of the products of a recent Anglo-Japanese research project on school reform[1], it has been informed by cross-cutting perspectives and insights: both the observations and judgements of the English researchers of Japanese education, and those of the Japanese researchers studying education in England and Wales. The latter formed and conveyed their own impressions both of reforms in the UK, and of our perceptions of Japanese traditions and reforms. As Phillips noted in his discussion of 'cross-national attraction' in education (1989), national insiders are often baffled by what attracts outsiders about their education systems.

1 The Project 'Comparing Japanese and English School Reform' was undertaken in 1988 with funding from the Japan Embassy in London. Participants from London included Andy Green, Janet Ouston and Akiko Sakamoto from the Institute of Education. Participants from Japan included: Tetsuya Kobayashi, President of Poole Gakuin University, Osaka; Manabu Ueda from Kyoto Women's University; and Tadahiko Abiko from Nagoya University. The London team conducted 25 interviews and observations in schools and education administration offices, mainly in the Tokyo, Osaka and Fukuoka regions. The article also draws on the author's research for the ESRC 'High Skills Project' with Hugh Lauder and Phil Brown.

Standards and Egalitarianism in Japanese Education

Western assessments of Japanese education have clearly waxed and waned in the post World War Two era and there has rarely been much consensus in academic circles as to how it should be evaluated. William Cummings, one of the first and most scholarly of western analysts of Japanese education, no doubt exaggerated slightly when he claimed that there was a dominant negative mythology about Japanese education in the US which portrayed it as a state-dominated socialisation process marred by excessive rote learning, competition and student suicide (Cummings, 1989). Jon Woronoff, in a recent philippic against so-called 'Japanophiles', no doubt exaggerates equally when he claims that 'No aspect of Japanese society has been singled out for more lavish praise (and less criticism) than the educational system' (1996, p.99). There have inevitably been both critics and acolytes a-plenty and only the most naive of commentators have seen it as either all good or all bad. However, there has been a degree of consensus in the evaluation of at least one aspect of Japanese education.

Japanese schooling, or at least the public and compulsory part of it, is often characterised by western commentators by its relative egalitarianism and consistency of outcomes. Studies by Merry White (1987) and Ronald Dore and Mari Sako (1989) both emphasise the success of Japanese schools in encouraging the majority of children to achieve and the relatively low variation in performance outcomes between children. William Cummings, whose research admittedly focused mainly on primary schools in Japan in the 1960s, entitled his major study 'Education and Equality in Japan' and claimed that 'Japan's distribution of cognitive skills is probably more equal than in any other contemporary society.' (1980, p.6). Even official studies for the UK Government, which are not usually noted for their strong endorsements in international reports, also frequently note this characteristic. The DFE report *Teaching and Learning in Japanese Elementary Schools* (DFE/Scottish Office, 1992, p.19) concluded that: 'A pervasive and powerful assumption of Japanese elementary education is that virtually all children are capable of learning and understanding the content prescribed in the Course of Study,

provided they work hard enough and receive adequate support from their families, peers and teachers' (although it should be noted that some Japanese scholars maintain that up to a third of Japanese children are unable to keep up with the class by the last years of primary education: see Ichikawa, 1989).

This common perception of high average standards and relative equality of outcomes has been repeatedly confirmed by International Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) surveys. In the IEA study of maths attainment in 12 countries conducted in the mid 60s (Husen, 1967), Japanese 13 year olds had the highest mean scores of any country. The second international study of achievement in maths conducted in the early 1980s, again showed Japanese 13 years olds scoring on average higher than the other 13 countries in the sample (see Lynn, 1988). In the IEA survey of science attainment in nineteen countries (Coomber and Reeves, 1973) Japanese children at 11 and 14 years achieved the highest average scores with amongst the lowest levels of variation between individuals. A second science survey conducted in the mid 1980s found Japanese 14 year olds still had the second highest average scores with the lowest levels of variations between schools (IEA, 1988). Attainment spread is greater at the higher grades in Japan, as one would expect, but the evidence does confirm the frequent observations of outsiders that compared with many other countries, Japan does achieve relatively equal outcomes in the compulsory years of education (Ichikawa, 1989).[2] The difference with England and the US is particularly marked, not surprisingly since education in these countries has long been associated with rather high levels of inequality. In focusing on the question of equality in Japanese education, commentators from both the US and the UK have clearly been aware that Japan has something their countries lack.

The achievement of relative equality within Japanese schooling is the result of a host of quite specific social and educational factors, some of which go back to the early modernisation period, but most of which are specifically post-war phenomena .

2 The evidence from the recent Third International Maths and Science Study (TIMSS) is less clear cut but awaits full analysis.

Learning in Japan has always carried high social esteem, partly because of the value placed upon it within the Confucian tradition and partly because of the relative absence of public socialising agencies other than the school. Education was quite widespread in pre-industrial Tokugawa Japan; the school was both a repository of Confucian learning and a place for the education and socialisation of children, thus combining two functions which in most western societies were divided between the school and the Church (Dore, 1997, 1982; Passim, 1965). Economic and social modernisation after the Meiji Restoration in 1868 gave schools further prominence. They were to become the essential vehicles of ideological unification and modernisation in a concerted process of state-led nation-building engineered by the Meiji reformers. At the same time, they were called upon to generate the knowledge and skills that were vital for Japan's nascent industrialisation process. Like all subsequent late-developing countries, Japan was particularly dependent on education for economic growth since this rested precisely on the ability to learn from other countries (Dore, 1997). From its inception in 1872, the public education system was thus already conceived as a key institution for the attainment of national goals in citizen and human capital formation (Green, 1997, 1999). This alone would have guaranteed its strong emphasis on universality and inclusiveness, as demonstrated by the rapid achievement of full enrolment in elementary schools by 1910 (Dore, 1997; Passim, 1965). However, other historical social factors to do with class formation have also combined to emphasise equality in Japanese education. Modernisation virtually eliminated the old elites in Japanese society, as it did not in countries like Germany and Britain, and post-war Japan has emerged as one of the less class-divided of advanced societies: for all its vertical divisions of gender and sector, the Japanese labour market has a flatter distribution of income than in any other of the developed economies (Perkin, 1996). Nation-building, the lack of old elites and non-educational vehicles of social mobility, and relative economic and cultural homogeneity have thus all combined historically to produce an environment favouring educational equality.

However, it is only in the period since World War Two that an education system has emerged with

specific institutional characteristics favouring equality. Most important of these has been the creation of the 6-3-3 public system of elementary, secondary and high schools first proposed by the American occupying powers after the war and readily accepted then by a Japanese population eager to embrace a new democracy in education. Envisaged as a fully comprehensive system, and strongly supported as such by the influential teacher union *Nikkyoso*, this was never fully realised at the upper end since the post-war high schools rapidly became both selective and specialised under the pressure of increasing demand. Nevertheless, public elementary and secondary schools remained both non-selective and neighbourhood- based, providing relative equality of access to children from all social groups.

Other institutional factors have been important in fostering equal opportunities in education. Centralised control has been used to equalise funding between schools, just as frequent rotation of teachers and heads between schools has worked to ensure consistency in the other key area of resourcing.[3] Mixed ability classes throughout the compulsory years and automatic promotion between grades have promoted uniformity of school experiences and standards for each age cohort of children (Ichikawa, 1989). This uniformity has been further reinforced through central control over curricula, assessment methods and textbooks, all of which are tightly prescribed by Monbusho through its detailed Course of Study for each year of schooling and which teachers tend to follow quite closely.

Lastly, but not least, there has been a strong equalising force from the prevailing view in Japan that achievement is largely the product of effort rather than innate ability (Takeuchi, 1991). This belief is widely held by teachers in public schools (White, 1987) and appears also to leave its mark on children. A review of research by Susan Holloway (1988) on concepts of ability and effort amongst school children strongly suggests that Japanese children are much more likely than their American counterparts to ascribe both their successes and failures to levels of effort rather than ability. Not only have Japanese children traditionally been encouraged to believe that they can all do well if they try hard

3 Head teachers tend to be moved around every 3-5 years: interview at National Institute for Education Research, Tokyo.

enough, but they have also been encouraged to help each other in the process, with the faster ones commonly helping the slower ones in group tasks which are subsequently assessed on group rather than individual performance (White, 1987).

All the above factors, both institutional and pedagogic, have helped to maintain consistency of inputs in education across the range of schools and to embed strong normative expectations for all children. The result, not surprisingly, has been the high level of consistency in the standards achieved by children in the key areas of the compulsory curriculum which has been so often applauded by foreign observers. Further spin-offs from this inclusive educational culture have been the high rates of participation in upper secondary education (currently 97 per cent) and beyond that in higher education (46 per cent)[4]. Few countries, excepting perhaps South Korea, have been so successful in keeping young people in the schooling system.

The Current Crisis in Japanese Education

Equality of opportunity in Japanese schooling has been strongly supported by teacher unions and, up until recently at least, by the general public. The school system has also, arguably, served the economy well during the long period of economic expansion from 1950 to the beginning of the present decade (Ashton and Green, 1996; Koike and Inoki, 1990). The schools turned out a ready and increasing supply of high school and higher education graduates to meet the needs of the expanding labour market. These tended to have few occupational skills on entry to work but were well prepared in the basic knowledge and skills that rendered them easily trainable in the large companies that in any case preferred to train in house; they well were disciplined, hard working and socialised into forms of co-operative working that suited the organisational styles of Japanese enterprises (Dore and Sako, 1989;

4 Interview at Monbusho..

Green, 1997a; Green 1997b; Stephens, 1991). As future consumers and citizens Japan's school leavers were also well groomed in the dominant values and culture of Japan's relatively conformist and homogeneous society (Green, 1999).

However, all of this came at some cost, and that cost is now being counted. Japanese children have been well prepared with the basic knowledge and skills, are good at calculation and typically have well trained memories, not least from the learning of Chinese Kanji characters. They also tend, as Cummings has noted, 'to have an exceptional ability for concentration, for attention to detail and for discipline' (1980, p. 228). However, they have generally had less opportunity than their western counterparts for exercising their creative and analytical powers (Horio, 1988) and for developing their confidence and articulacy in oral communication. They are also subject to a host of problems in personal development which result from the stress created by the excessively competitive examination system (Horio, 1988; Kudomi, 1994). School bullying and school refusal have become increasingly prominent and cause understandable distress and anxiety throughout Japanese society (Horio, 1986).
The fundamental problem in Japanese education is the problem of excessive examination competition. This, in a sense, is the price of Japan's success in motivating such a large proportion of its young people to achieve and to believe that they can compete for the important prizes. Because everyone is in the game, the competition becomes intense, and because everyone is deemed capable of achieving, there are no alibis for failure. As in Michael Young's famous satire on meritocracy (1958), this can be a cruel regime because so much is at stake and because people believe that they have only themselves to blame for failure. As such the 'examination hell' in Japan may be viewed as an inevitable concomitant of meritocracy. Certainly, many believe, following Ronald Dore's famous thesis in the *Diploma Disease* (1997), that an inflationary credentialism is a property of late and rapid development in general and not something peculiar to Japan. However, credential competition in Japan has taken on some specific forms.

Several factors have conjoined in Japan's post-war social and educational development to exacerbate

the competition problem. In the first place, the egalitarian comprehensive system of schools instituted after the war did, quite properly, encourage the majority of children to aspire to a good education. As secondary schooling rapidly became universalised so the majority sought high school graduation and then university graduation as the passport to safe jobs and social mobility. The comprehensive high schools in the original post war plans were never implemented and a late attempt to revive them in the late 1960s was abandoned after a rapid flight of parents to selective private schools believed to offer advantages in getting children into good universities (Schoppa, 1991). High schools remained selective and the enlarged prefectural zones created in the 1960s included a number of schools which quickly became ranked into a hierarchy according to their performance in getting students into the best universities. Three tiers emerged: at the top were the public and occasionally private general high schools with the best record of getting students into favoured universities; below them the vocational and specialist high schools with connections to the large companies and which offered reasonable prospects of post-graduation employment; and at the bottom the general high schools which could offer neither of these and to which few wanted to go (Inui and Hosogane,1995). As the supply of higher education graduates increased, there were diminishing opportunities for employment for high school leavers outside of manual, clerical and sales work.[5] Demand for places in high schools that might lead to university entrance thus grew immense (Amano, 1997).

The ranking of high schools and universities has been exacerbated by the nature of their relations with the labour market. Neither high schools nor universities in Japan offer graded degrees. Japan's larger firms, which offer the most desirable employment to young people, operate internal labour markets and do not generally require pre-entry occupational qualifications. They recruit on the basis of general educational abilities and aptitudes. Given that there is no grading of educational qualifications firms therefore tend to recruit through their networks with particular schools and universities and to give preference to those from the high schools and universities which are deemed to have the 'best students'. Given the lack of external standards in the awards of graduation certificates, the merit of an institution's

5 In 1995 the proportion of high school leavers getting white collar jobs was 17 percent (Amano, 1997).

graduates tends to be determined by the degree of selectivity of that institution's intake. Firms are thus recruiting young people not because of what they know when they graduate but because they are thought to have general ability on account of the fact that they gained entry to a good and highly selective high school or university (Dore, 1997).

The situation which has emerged since the 1960s is thus one where everything hinges on success in entrance exams to high schools and universities. Entrance to a good high school gives the best chance of entrance to a good university and this in turn determines chances of getting a good job with a major company. High schools are ranked according to how many graduates they get into the top few universities and universities are judged according to the selectivity of their recruitment and how many of their graduates get into the best firms. Getting into a good high school depends on doing well in the public high school entrance exams set by the Prefectures (or the private exams set by the private high schools) and getting into a good university depends on doing well in both the national university entrance exams and the exams set by the individual institutions. Preparation for these exams thus becomes a major preoccupation. Choosing which university to apply for is also tactically important since great expense is invested in taking a number of entrance exams. Consequently there is an enormous commercial market in the prediction of exam results, which involves children taking private tests to determine their *hensachi* ranking which further fuels the obsession with tests. The whole system has been described as a 'unidimensional meritocracy' because all rankings in the end tend to boil down to the *hensachi* scores (Horio, 1996).

The adverse effects of this kind of unidimensional selection system are apparent and evidently growing. In the first place it has a negative backwash effect on the school curriculum encouraging an excessive concentration on a narrow preparation in those areas relevant to the exams. In the second place it encourages parents to spend enormous sums on sending their children to the private crammer schools (the evening *juku*s and full-time pre-university *yobiko*s) and children to spend many arduous hours following their courses (up to 60 per cent of 14 and 15 year olds were attending *jukus* for an average of

three evenings a week at the last count in 1993: CCE, 1996). In the third place it puts an unendurable stress on many students and particularly those in the middle ability range who have the potential to succeed but to whom it does not come easy (Dore, 1997). Japanese children spend already more days in school than children in most other countries (220 days per year to 180 in the USA). Add to this the three evenings a week spent in *juku* by the average 15 year old and the two or three hours a night homework and the level of over-exertion is fairly plain to see.

Examination competition is clearly a major problem in Japanese schooling and there is little evidence that it is abating (CCE, 1997) - in fact *juku* attendance continues to rise despite evident parental financial overstretch in these times of recession and despite official anxiety about its effects on public education. This is in some ways surprising since pressure on university places is reducing with the shrinking of the youth cohort which, if current capacity is maintained, could allow all children a place in university by the year 2009 (CCE, 1997). However, subtle shifts are occurring, although these are not necessarily attenuating the problems.

Two phenomena are apparent. The first is that with the demographic decline there is an easing of pressure for entry to the middle and lower ranking universities. This theoretically reduces the pressure to achieve on the mid-attaining students although leaves competition for Todai and the other top universities as intense as ever. The second shift involves the changing relations in the labour market and their effects on the utility of credentials. The traditional linkages between educational success and safe career prospects are beginning to break down with the effects of the economic recession and the changing nature of work and technology. Graduation from top universities no longer guarantees 'lifetime employment' in the pick of the large companies. Companies are increasingly restricting 'lifetime employment' (and the training that goes with it) to core workers and even these are not always safe from early retirement or displacement to marginal positions.[6] With the current surplus of qualified labour, and with new pressures on companies to be flexible and innovative, employers are seeking to

6 Interview at Matsushita.

select recruits who have skills and aptitudes in addition to those general educational abilities which are identified with graduation from good universities (Sakamoto-Vandenberg et al, 1998). Some ten percent of firms (CCE, 1997) now even report recruiting 'blind', ie without reference to the university from which the applicant has graduated (although the fact that Sony has apparently recruited a higher proportion from top universities since it started doing this suggests the effect is not so much to weaken the advantage of elite graduates but rather to make selection from amongst them more competitive and dependent on additional qualities)[7]. In addition, increasing labour mobility is likely to increase the demand for pre-entry occupational skills, particularly in the medium and smaller enterprises that can least afford to train and where labour movement is greatest. All of these changes weaken the old certainties about the linkages between educational success and career opportunities. The future income pay-off from educational credentials can no longer be assumed.

These changes are having complex effects on student motivation. On the one hand, for the high flying students there is sustained competition for examination success and a level of motivation which is only intensified by the additional demands which employers are making for additional 'extra-curricula' strengths. On the other hand, for the middle and lower attaining students there is a potential for demotivation deriving from contradictory forces. Getting places at university is easier which should increase opportunities and motivation but paradoxically the future rewards from university graduation are less certain. Many young people may now be beginning to feel that the excessive slog for examination success may not be worth the candle. Not only are they less sure of their futures if they do succeed; they are also beginning, along with other sections of Japanese society, to wonder whether a life of hard work and little leisure is an ideal to which to aspire. This loss of faith in the old certainties may also be causing some friction with parents and teachers (an ageing workforce) who still have faith in the older certainties of education and career opportunity (Amano, 1997).

The effect of these contradictory forces seems to be simultaneously to 'warm-up' and 'cool-out'

7 Interview at Central Council for Education.

different groups of students. While the majority are still motivated towards success and disciplined by the regime of hard work, a minority, often in the lower ranking general public high schools, are increasingly demotivated and may become more so as competition from private schools incrementally erodes their opportunities. The growing prevalence of bullying and school refusal are no doubt related to these changes. Bullying is most likely amongst demotivated and marginalised students, of which there are a growing number. Both bullying and school refusal may be more prevalent in a situation of uncertainty and anxiety and where the consensus of values among students, parents and teachers around school achievement is beginning to break down.

The Current Reform Agenda

The current education reform agenda in Japan is the culmination of some 30 years of debates which have questioned the very foundations of the Japanese system - not least its centralised control, its uniformity and even its egalitarian 6-3-3 structure. The Central Council on Education, supported by the business community and other lobbies, had been seeking greater diversification of education throughout the 1960s and in 1967 conducted an evaluation marking the first 20 years of the new system which set the agenda for the 1970s and beyond. Former Prime Minister Nakasone's Ad Hoc Council on Education (*Rinkyoshin*), inaugurated in 1984, developed this agenda further, recommending a programme of reforms which would enhance flexibility *(Junanka*) and extend diversity and choice in schools (*Jiyuka*) (Schoppa, 1991). These initiatives did not lead at the time to extensive reforms in the system, not least because of continuing support for the egalitarian principles of the 6-3-3 system both within the ministry (Monbusho) and amongst the public at large. However, the debate has continued and many now consider the time more ripe for change.[8] The Central Council on Education is again playing a major role in rethinking the basic principles and objectives in the education system with its to-date two major reports on *The Model for Japanese Education in the Perspective of the 21st Century* (CCE, 1996, 1997).

8 This was the perception conveyed, at least, at our interview in Monbusho.

CCE argues that education reform must be seen in the context of the major economic and social changes which are currently impacting on education. In the social sphere Japanese society is changing rapidly. The population is ageing fast with a projected 25 per cent over 65 by the year 2015. Families are getting smaller with fathers working long hours away from home and mothers increasingly returning to paid employment. Community cohesion and solidarity is said to be weakening with greater diversity of values, cultures and lifestyles. The education of children is being affected by all these changes, with the educative capacity of the home and the community declining, and with schools struggling to make good the deficit in the face of increasing uncertainty of values and opportunities. Children are working excessive hours at school and in private study; their lives and those of their parents are so busy that there is little space for personal growth and development. Surveys suggest that today's children typically have less contact with older people than before, keep up with fewer friends, have less physical stamina and are more prone to obesity (CCE, 1996). In general, they are thought to lack the range and richness of life experiences that allow for full and rounded personal development. They need, in CCE's terms, more 'room to grow' (*yutori*) and more 'zest for living', and the current school system is not allowing this.

Economic change also places new demands on education. The spread of information technology creates the need for new skills and allows new possibilities for learning in flexible and diverse environments. Rapidly changing technology, new working methods and the waning of lifetime employment all put a greater premium upon flexibility and adaptability amongst adult employees. Above all, the intensification of economic competition in an increasingly global market places greater pressure on the Japanese economy to increase its productive potential and this makes new demands on skills. According the CCE - and to most other reports from government agencies - the Japanese economy has to move ever more rapidly towards the high-tech, high value-added areas of production and services if it is to keep competitive and this requires higher skills and more innovation. As the CCE puts it :

> Japan has reached a stage where it will no longer be allowed to use the methods hitherto employed of skilfully making use of scientific and technological achievements of Western nations. Nowadays, it is being called upon to create its own scientific and technological achievements and to develop new frontiers for itself (CCE, 1996, p.13).

Few would argue these days that Japan is not innovating, at least in the manufacturing sector where it has most excelled. However, continuous improvement (*Kaizen*) has been the watchword of economic development in the period of growth and current economic pressures clearly make this more essential than ever. In the view of the CCE, the current education system fails to develop sufficient creativity and analytical thinking to meet the new economic challenges. In their words:

> ...it is clear that to us that what children will need in the future....are the qualities and the ability to identify problem areas for themselves, to learn, think, make judgements and act independently and to be more adept at problem-solving. (1996, p.18)

They also need to develop a more international outlook so that Japan can work effectively in increasingly global environments (Kobayashi, 1980).

The Central Council on Education analysis of the problems in Japanese education is wide ranging and profound. It addresses head-on the urgent issues which seem most to concern parents and students, such as exam competition, bullying and work pressure, as well as those questions of skills formation which top the agendas of the groups representing business. And it does this through an analysis which looks at the long-term development of society and the economy. The economic and human concerns of the reports are well balanced and seem to represent a more consensual understanding of the problems than some of the reports issuing from earlier debates. The diagnosis seems one with which many of those with deep interests in education in Japan could identify. However, the diagnosis is easier than the cure. How far do the CCE's recommendations represent a viable and consensual package of reforms which can address these deep-seated problems? How can the experiences of educational reform in England and Wales help to illuminate this?

The CCE's central contention is that Japanese education needs to diversify if it is to respond to the

needs of the coming century; it needs to pay more heed to the individual and to individual difference and that means modifying its historic emphasis on equality.

> Securing equality of opportunity in education is important in any age, and from now on as well, continuing efforts to this end are fundamental. However, until now in Japan, demands for formal equality have been *too strong* (my emphasis) , and that an education which responds to individual abilities and aptitudes has not been given sufficient consideration must be rectified (sic). Up until now education was controlling and in all areas the idea was 'Everyone together and equal'; approaches must now be advanced to shift this idea to 'Contents, methods and approaches that respond to each person's individuality and abilities' (1997, p.7).

One of the interesting questions for English educators, with experience of an education system with a long history of both diversity and inequality, is whether reforms in Japan can deliver diversity without unacceptable inequality, and whether, equally, the Japanese public will accept reforms if they jeopardise equality. This seems to be the major puzzle which Japan has to solve.

The reforms proposed by the CCE can be divided into two clusters which broadly correspond to the distinction between 'flexibilitisation' (*Junanka*) and 'diversification' (*Jiyuka*) in the original Ad Hoc Council proposals. The precise measures are not invariably the same as in earlier reform packages, and there is inevitably some overlap between the categories, but the distinction is important both politically and operationally. The two, although sometimes linked in the Anglo-phone countries (decentralisation plus marketisation), need not be co-terminous and may, indeed, have different effects (for instance, countries like France, Germany and Denmark have decentralized their systems to some extent but without attempting to introduce quasi-market forces into the system: Green, Wolf and Leney, 1999). They also clearly appeal to different constituencies and are thus significant in terms of the political viability of each type of reform. *Junanka* includes proposals to reduce the school week, to free-up curricula and assessment methods, to introduce more individualised modes of teaching, as well as various other measures which would give more autonomy to local Boards of Education and individual

schools. *Jiyuka* involves diversifying the range of schools and introducing more school choice. It has also in the past meant a greater role for the private sector in education.

Making the System More Flexible

Japanese schooling clearly does need to be more flexible if it is to respond better to the needs of individual students, cater to the demands for new types of knowledge and creativity and begin to abate the problems of excessive competition, bullying and school refusal. As the second report from the CCE affirms: 'In the future in Japan a respect for individuality, the possibility of independent and responsible individuals, and aiming for the construction of a full and mature society will be demanded' (1996, p.3). These demands will only be met by a school system which is capable of changing in response to changing priorities in society. However, observation of the reform to date suggest that this process will be slow, and that it needs indeed to be implemented with some care if other strengths in the current system are not to be jeopardised.

Proposals for allowing more diversity and freedom in the curriculum have so far been modest but suggest a significant trend towards allowing students more choice in their studies and more 'space' for personal development. Up to 20 per cent of the curriculum time in primary and lower secondary schools is now available for elective subjects and more in the high schools. The so-called integrated high schools (*sogo gakko*), in particular, have considerable curriculum autonomy and have proved popular in many districts. The school week is gradually being reduced from five and a half to five days, which will significantly reduce pressure on students, providing other measures can be taken to discourage further *juku* attendance which would otherwise simply fill the available space. There have also been proposals for implementing two hours a week of 'integrated study' time for pursuing cross-curricula themes which allow teachers a space for genuine innovation.

More radically, the CCE also proposes a radical reduction of the content of the compulsory curriculum

and a change in the form of the Course of Study so that it would only offer general curriculum guidelines rather than detailed prescription of contents.[9] This would seem somewhat less likely to materialise. Many teachers and parents still feel concerned about the loss of consistency in learning environments that might result from de-regulating the curriculum too far. The move would also be somewhat incompatible with the still strong desire of the CCE to maintain a solid component of moral and civic education in the school system so that schools may continue to act as a cohesive force, promoting Japanese identity and national values. According to its first report, education aimed at encouraging a 'rich sense of humanity' should be implemented by a 'further strengthening of moral education' (1996, p. 45). The definition of a 'rich sense of humanity' in the second report continues to stress many of the traditional features of moral education:

> ...first come the basic essentials, cultivating a rich sense of humanity with consideration for others and a sense of justice etc., and cultivating hearts that respect Japanese traditions and culture, things that will remain important no matter how much society or the ages change .. the principle of respect for others and the harmony of society, for example, living together with others and showing consideration for others, being tolerant towards what is different, possessing an awareness of society and a sense of morality, and a heart that gives weight to a sense of justice and fairness must co-exist... (1997, p. 6)

There are conflicting pressures and priorities here which are not easily resolved. Clearly Japanese children do need more space to develop their own independent thinking and creativity. Teachers also need to be encouraged to explore with them different ways of interpreting the world and understanding the past and present realities. Greater freedom in curricula and the use of learning materials and textbooks would assist this process. However, the need to retain a cohesive core of values is also important. In countries where curricula are relatively unregulated and individualised there has been a tendency for core values to become dissipated and cohesion to be reduced. In the England and Wales, where civic education is absent from the core prescribed subjects in the curriculum, there is a growing debate about the need to reintroduce values education more formally into the curriculum.

Introducing more flexibility into the teaching process is also a central plank of CCE reform proposals

9 Interview at MONBUSHO.

and a number of pilot schools have already been established to develop innovative practice in this area. The CCE wish to see teaching methods geared more to the individual needs and aptitudes of students. Greater use of 'experiential learning' and 'project work' are seen as a means to encourage student creativity and independent thinking; whilst observation-oriented science teaching is seen as a more effective way of stimulating interest in scientific phenomena. More responsive and varied teaching methods are believed to be a way of maintaining student motivation and of reducing the tendency for students to 'stuff their heads' full of facts. Some shift in this direction would certainly seem necessary if Japanese schooling is to do more to promote independent and creative thinking and to make life easier for students who do not respond so well to the more traditional modes of teaching. However, there are also obstacles that will need to be overcome here.

There is still considerable conservatism both amongst some teachers and parents as regards the use of new and more individualised teaching methods.[10] Teachers will need considerable professional development support to innovate in these areas and maximum use will need to be made of the extensive system of in-service training in Japan to achieve this. There are also resourcing issues to be dealt with. Individualised teaching works best in small classes but Japan still has rather large classes (40 on average in secondary schools) with limited physical classroom space. Resource-based learning also requires extensive equipment and facilities, not least in computers and computer-based learning software and these are currently in relatively short supply in many Japanese schools. There are also legitimate fears that more individualised and autonomous modes of study, whilst beneficial to the more able and independent students, may not serve others so well. The UK experience is, again, relevant here. English schools, in particular, moved a long way towards individualised and resource-based learning from the late 1960s, probably further than in most countries within Europe. The experience, particularly as it applied in the primary and lower secondary schools, is now being seriously questioned in some respects. Lower attaining and less self-directed students are thought by many to need more structured and directed learning environments if they are to achieve. Whilst resource-based learning is

10 Interview with National Institute for Educational research, Tokyo.

still being promoted, particularly in the post-compulsory parts of the system, there has been a strong move since 1988 towards a greater emphasis on structure, through target setting, emphasis on core skill learning and more whole class teaching. Whilst Japanese schools clearly do need more innovation in teaching and learning methods, and more creative use of IT and resource-based learning, a wholesale abandonment of the traditions of inter-active whole class teaching might well be a mistake, particularly for the lower attaining students, and will probably be resisted by many teachers and parents.

Lastly, and probably amongst the most urgent of the issues on the CCE's reform agenda, is the question of diversifying assessment and selection mechanisms for high schools and universities. This is rightly considered as absolutely crucial for tackling the problem of 'over-heated' examination competition and the unwanted effects that have been associated with it. Action to date has included encouraging Prefectures, high schools and universities to rely less exclusively on the traditional written tests for selection purposes and to make more use instead of other assessment instruments such as high school records (and grade point averages), recommendations, short essays and interviews. Further actions, which are to be extended, include creating alternative modes of access to universities for mature students, for students returning from education overseas and for graduates of vocational high schools and specialist high schools. Some universities already have special entrance criteria for such categories of entrants, and even reserved quotas of places, and they are being encouraged to extend these programmes.

These measures are no doubt essential to reducing the ill-effects of examination competition and the unidimensional meritocracy which it promotes. It cannot be good for the Japanese school system to be driven to such a large extent by the very narrow requirements for success in the traditional entrance tests, and it cannot be good for students to spend so much time and money in cramming for and taking these tests. So long as they remain the dominant focus of education any attempts to diversify curricula, to innovate in teaching methods and to encourage greater creativity and independent thinking in education are doomed to fail.

The CCE reports good progress to date in reforms in this area. According to the second report over 70 per cent of Prefectures have implemented policies whereby admission to high schools depends on multiple criteria, including, *inter alia*: school records and recommendations, interviews, short essays and practical testing. The majority of national and public universities now also make some use of alternative means of selection: interviews (91.9 per cent); essays (93.0 per cent); special procedures for adults (41.9 per cent). However, the figures apply only to public sector institutions and then only report on the selective adoption of new measures. In 1997 still 60 per cent of students for public universities were selected on the basis of exams alone. The most elite universities, both public and private, and the most sought-after courses, are still mostly selecting through exams alone (Amano, 1997). So long as competition for the highest prizes continues to be dominated by the traditional narrow forms of assessment, these are likely to remain the ultimate benchmarks for success.

School Diversification

School diversification is the other major theme running through CCE and Monbusho reports. It is advocated as a means of breaking down the uniformity and rigidity of the current system so that schools may be more responsive to the diversity of individual students' needs and also to the changing requirements of the labour market and so that parents may have more choice, as is thought fitting in a mature democratic society. The CCE also argue that a greater diversity of school types may help to break down the current institutional hierarchies whereby all schools and universities tend to be ranked by the public according to undimensional criteria of exam success.[11] The idea is that if schools are allowed to develop their own individual characters and specialisms, parents will begin to select them for a variety of reasons, according to the needs and aptitudes of their children and not simply because they are good at getting students through exams. Relatively little emphasis is currently placed on school choice as a mechanism for increasing competition between schools and for increasing efficiency. In this

11 Our interviewee at MOBUSHO also endorsed this argument.

respect there is a marked difference in the character of the debate in Japan compared with other countries such as the UK and the US, where it has been prevalent.

Two kinds of diversification are currently being promoted. Firstly, Prefectures are being encouraged to set up 'integrated' high schools (*sogo gakko*) which provide a broader range of general and vocational courses and which allow more curriculum choice for students. There are currently 105 of these and around 20 new ones are being created each year, often in rural areas and as a way of 'rescuing' schools which have declined in popularity and reputation.[12] Monbusho's plans are currently to have at least one in each Prefecture.[13] These schools are not typically fully comprehensive high schools - most are based on former general high schools and only introduce a relatively narrow range of vocational options, in areas like business administration, media and Information Technology. They are seen as an additional type of school, to encourage diversity, rather than as a way of integrating the high school system. However, they have often proved to be quite popular and are often under some pressure over admissions since they are not subject to zonal restrictions in their admissions.

The second form of diversification is through the creation of six-year secondary schools which combine what are normally the lower secondary and high school stages of education in one school. These have become quite popular in the private sector and the CCE and

12Interview at Imamiya Senior high School in Osaka.
13 Interview at Monbusho.

Monbusho are keen for them to be extended into the public school system, where there is currently only one. CCE argues that these integrated schools offer advantages for children in terms of stability and continuity; the longer period in one institution may promote closer relations between teachers and students and may allow the latter more room for development (*yutori*) given the absence of pressures to compete for high school places. As with the 'integrated' and specialist high schools, these could come in various forms - characterised by integrated courses, or specialised provision, or with a predominantly academic focus - and admissions would not be subject to zonal restrictions. They are therefore seen as another way

of increasing school choice. Current policy is that Prefectures should decide as to whether to implement these schools, but that they should remain only one option amongst several in a diversified public school system.[14]

These measures are already quite controversial and it not difficult to see why. Students who gain admission to these new types of school may well benefit, but there may be adverse effects on the rest of the public system. The new schools are likely to be seen as elite institutions and are likely to attract more applicants than they can accommodate, which means that they will have to select. Monbusho is currently saying that it will not allow them to select on academic criteria alone and that it favours selection by a combination of interviews, school records and recommendations and practical tests.[15] It is even suggested that allocation may be partly by lottery (as currently occurs in most high school in South Korea, although this policy is under review). However, it seems unlikely if the schools become very over-subscribed that the system will be able to resist pressure to select on academic grounds. In England and Wales, where school choice is already in operation, there is a variety of criteria for allocating places to oversubscribed local authority comprehensive schools, which were originally not meant to select by ability. However, popular schools have tended to use interviews and school record information as proxy evidence for academic ability in their selection process, so that the popular schools can in fact become de-facto academically selective. In addition to this, governments have over the last few years created quota of places that can be filled by academic selection. Once school choice

14 Interview at Monbusho.
15 Interview at Monbusho.

becomes the norm and popular schools are in the position of having to select, there seems to be an innate tendency for selection to occur on academic grounds (Green, Wolf and Leney, 1999).

School diversification and choice policies have often not worked out as their advocates have intended. The main problem seems to be the built-in tendency for educational markets to rank institutions monotonically, according to a narrow set of criteria, and thus to create hierarchies. Even where the policy intention is to create a range of schools horizontally differentiated according to their particular characteristics and specialisms, parents are inclined to choose them according to traditional academic criteria (examination excellence) which leads to vertical stratification. As Donald Hirsch shows in his admirable analysis of school choices policies in OECD countries (OECD, 1994) this has been the trend, to a greater or lesser extent, in all countries where these policies have been instigated, even where controls have been built in to mitigate the effect. Vertical ranking of schools then becomes self-perpetuating. As academically successful schools become more in demand, they become increasingly academically selective, and increasingly academically successful in a continuing spiral. Schools with lesser reputations, on the other hand, become less popular and are less able to admit high achieving students. This in turn leads to a further decline in their reputations and potential demoralising of staff and lowering of effectiveness. The net result is increasing differentiation of schools by intake abilities, and consequently by outcomes, as the evidence suggests has happened in most OECD countries adopting these policies (OECD, 1994).

If school choice is extended in Japan it must be considered particularly likely that this effect will result since Japanese society is already rather prone to the ‘unidimensional meritocracy’ syndrome. Increasing the numbers of six-year secondary schools will increase the momentum for choice since they allow more scope for choosing outside of the traditional catchment areas, and since more is at stake in the choice of these schools. Unlike traditional lower secondary schools they include the upper secondary stage where student futures are largely decided and therefore it matters all the more for parents whether they achieve good results with their children. If, as seems predictable, the six-year schools come to be

seen as elite schools and are in high demand, they are most likely in time to become academically selective. This will fuel public demand for wider access to these schools and thus begin a self-perpetuating process of expanding choice to all schools.

Three unintended effects may follow from this. Firstly, examination competition, rather than abating, will simply be shifted down to the younger age groups who are competing for entry to the six-year schools. Secondly, the hierarchical ranking of schools, currently most evident at the high school level, will extend through the whole secondary system, and quite likely from there to the primary system as well. Thirdly, diversification, rather than being a process of proliferation of different types of school, will become simply a question of differentiation according to ranking on a scale defined by a single criteria of examination excellence. If this happens then parental pressure for choice at all levels of school may become increasingly hard to resist. The consequences of this would most likely be that inequalities would increase between schools in terms of intakes, outcomes and effectiveness. The characteristic of Japanese schooling which has been most admired abroad, and not a little cherished at home, would be lost.

Six-year schools were first proposed in 1971 (CCE, 1997) and school choice generally was strongly supported in the 1980s by the Ad Hoc Council. Proposals were not implemented in either area because of continuing public support for the 6-3-3 system and because Monbusho recognised professional misgivings about the adverse consequences which might flow from their introduction. However, there is now a stronger momentum in this direction.

One reason for this is that parents are already making more choices in schooling by opting increasingly for private schools. The proportion of private high schools has been steadily increasing, now accounting for 30 per cent of students at that level (Amano, 1997). Private high schools in Tokyo are also increasingly being seen as the top schools. In 1996 they accounted for 23 of the top 30 high schools in terms of their proportions of graduates gaining entry to Tokyo University, compared with

nine in 1970. Six-year private secondary schools have become more popular as have the so-called 'escalator schools' which act as feeders to some private universities, and which, in some cases, form complete ladders from kindergarten through primary and secondary stages and up to university. Parents are choosing these both because they are seen to give privileged access to good universities and also because they are believed to relieve children of some of the pressures associated with examination competition (Amano, 1997). It is estimated that now, in Tokyo, nearly 50 per cent of primary school children are preparing for private school entry exams and going to cram classes.

The more parents choose private schools, the stronger the pressure will be for choice in the public school sector. Other factors may also serve to hasten the school diversification process. Representatives of the business community have long favoured increasing school diversity and choice, including the availability of private schooling, both as a way of enhancing the school output of specialist skills and creative talents and, in some cases, as a means to increase efficiency and reduce cost in public education (Schoppa, 1991). Social change may also be favouring the extension of school choice. The weakening of community and neighbourhood ties inevitably undermines commitment to neighbourhood schooling and the catchment area system. At the same time, any increases in social polarisation and inequality will tend to exacerbate centrifugal pressures in education, particularly amongst a more affluent and socially distinctive strata of higher professionals and managers in Japanese society. Whatever the traditional reservations about abandoning the egalitarian principles of the uniform 6-3-3 system, social and economic trends may be pressing in this direction.

Conclusion

Japanese schooling would seem to be at a turning point. There is seemingly wide support for the notion that it needs to change. However, there are different directions of change, each of which responding to different pressures. This article has argued that the changes broadly referred to as 'flexibilisation' (*Junanka*) are most necessary and least likely to damage the traditional strengths of Japanese education.

Diversification (*Jiyuka*), on the other hand, whilst responding to real economic and social pressures, poses considerable dangers and may end up 'throwing the baby out with the bathwater'. The latter, however, is in some ways more likely to take root, not least because of the social and economic forces behind it. Ironically, if it does, it may actually induce a reaction against flexibilisation. Diversification is likely to create a more divided and fissiparous education system. This in turn may raise concerns about declining social cohesion and social discipline, for which Japanese society traditionally has low tolerance. One response to this might be a call for renewed central controls over the contents and methods of education to counteract the effects of institutional dis-integration. England and Wales in recent years have witnessed just this simultaneous process of institutional fragmentation (marketisation) and increased centralisation of curricula, qualifications and methods (Green, Wolf and Leney, 1999). The contexts are different, but the formal logics of maintaining equilibria between centrifugal and centripetal forces are similar.

There may be another path which Japanese schooling could take which would address some of the current problems without sacrificing the strengths of the current system. This would be to press ahead systematically but incrementally with the current measures to make the system more flexible, so that it can indeed begin to address the demands of the 21st century; but at the same time resisting pressures to diversify the institutional structures of schooling. Flexibility and diversity could be sought within schools, rather than amongst schools. Overheated examination competition could be addressed in two ways. Firstly, integrated high schools could be made the norm across the public sector, with school place allocation remaining on a zonal basis, preferably with smaller catchment areas to reduce the propensity for school ranking[16]. Secondly, 'private' high schools (which are already subject to considerable state regulation) could be required to recruit on the same zonal basis as the public high schools, thus limiting their potential to 'cream off' the most academically successful students. (This policy was tried in France in the early 1990s, met with immense opposition and was abandoned.

16 Our interviews suggest official support for this policy from both NIKKYOSO and ZEMKYO (All Japan Teachers and Staff Union).

However, given the regulatory culture in Japan it might have more chance of success here: Corbett and Moon, 1996). Thirdly, a new national system of selection for university entrance could be devised, which combined assessment by school record, recommendations and national tests, but which prohibited universities from using any additional assessment instruments other than interviews. Such a system would require some kind of 'clearing house' so that applicants rejected by one institution might have their applications passed on to their second and lower choice institutions for consideration.

The effects of such measures would be to reduce significantly the ranking syndrome amongst high schools and the dominance of the high school and university entrance tests within the system. They might also roll back the privatisation of the school sector, since there would be less incentives for parents to use the private schools and less incentives for the private schools to operate. This would no doubt be to the benefit of the public school system since the rampant commercialisation of education manifested currently by the private cramming schools is currently threatening to undermine it as well as to bankrupt many parents. Private initiative in education might then be channelled more towards the post-school sector, and particularly the special vocational colleges and academies (*senmon gakko*) where diversity is necessary, and where the educational entrepreneurialism has to date proved to be a benefit.

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