

## Introduction

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*A Nation at Risk* (1983) officially acknowledged weakness in American education and argued that this was detracting from national competitiveness. The report made specific reference to the educational successes of two Asian nations:

The risk is not only that the Japanese make automobiles more efficiently than America and have government subsidies for development and export. It is not just that the South Koreans recently built the world's most efficient steel mill, or that American machine tools, once the pride of the world, are being displaced by German products. It is also that these developments signify a redistribution of trained capability throughout the globe. Knowledge, learning, information, and skilled intelligence are the new raw materials of international commerce. (pp. 6, 7)

In related documents the report identified Japan as a consistent high performer in international studies of academic achievement.

Building on these insights, in 1984 the U.S. Department of Education began an extensive survey of what was then known about Japanese education. The final report published in 1986 included a list of twelve principles of good education, whether Japanese or American, derived by then Secretary of Education William J. Bennett: among these were the importance of parental involvement in their children's education; the necessity of clear purpose, strong motivation, and high standards; the importance of maximizing learning time and making effective use thereof; the centrality of holding high expectations for all children and a firm commitment to developing a strong work ethic and good study habits.

While full of praise for Japanese education, the above report noted several weaknesses of Japanese education including its inflexibility in responding to individual differences and growing signs of student alienation. Some

U.S. commentators were not very enthusiastic about this interest in Japanese education; for example, James Fallows of the *Atlantic Monthly* wrote a controversial piece subtitled "You would not want your children to go to a Japanese high school."

But others have persisted in their efforts to probe the nature of Japanese and more broadly Eastern Asian education, seeking policy implications for the United States. The contributions to this book are written by several of America's most authoritative specialists on Asian education. Each of the authors has conducted extensive field work in Asia, and has, in their essay for this book, made an impressive effort to distill their findings in a form that is readily communicable to the U.S. policy audience. Each essay provides us with a specific policy insight that can be included in the U.S. debate.

The essays are organized in five parts: (1) curricular and classroom processes for basic education, (2) new developments at the secondary level, (3) innovations in the private sector and in (4) the linkage of education to society, and finally (5) four essays focusing on more systemic issues.

The focus of the various essays is on policy, with due consideration to the context in which policies are conceived and implemented. The emphasis on policy has led to considerable reflection on the title of the book. Many recent studies of the dynamic development in the Asian area use geographic references such as Asia or East Asia, but Asia covers too much and East Asia is too small and, moreover, has a strong Confucian cultural connotation. What's more, some Confucian nations have not been as impressive in their educational progressiveness as others; indeed non-Confucian nations such as Malaysia and Indonesia seem to be out-pacing certain of the Confucian nations. Thus the geographic scope of this book is larger than East Asia. Other analysts (Mackerras, 1995), facing a similar dilemma, have settled on Eastern Asia in order to indicate their interest in the fuller array of regional dynamism. This book follows that convention. Chapter Sixteen by Cummings says more.

## Basic Education

Catherine Lewis, leading off the section on basic education, observes that a critical element in the success of education is the development of a pedagogy that responds to the "human" needs of young children. While American educators certainly believe their system is responsive to the needs of children, *Lewis implicitly argues that American education is overly slanted toward the enhancement of cognitive abilities, whereas Japan has developed*

*a more balanced approach that emphasizes the "whole-child."* She observes how the Japanese approach encourages values of friendship and cooperation, self-discipline and active involvement in classroom projects, aesthetic expression alongside cognitive competence. Children are not separated by a single criterion such as cognitive competence into different groups or tracks but rather are kept together so they can profit from their diversity. Her chapter introduces nine characteristics of "whole-child" education and points out that some U.S. school systems practice it with apparent success.

Harold Stevenson and Shinying Lee pick up on the wholistic theme, this time focusing on the Asian approach of teaching to the whole class rather than to individual students. They begin by acknowledging the negative images associated with teacher-centered teaching where teachers serve as drill-masters leading robots through a series of mindless choral recitation; if this image ever fitted Eastern Asian education, they insist it is long outdated. They then go into a detailed illustration of the actual practices they have observed in over fifteen years of research in Japan, China, Taiwan, and the United States. Concerning Japan, they note that the resistance there to academic grouping results in greater in-class diversity in academic ability than is characteristic of an American classroom. Moreover, class-size in Japan is generally much larger than in the United States. Despite these apparent handicaps, *the Japanese whole-class teaching approach is comparatively more effective in making use of pupil time and engagement, and thus in promoting learning.* This finding raises an implicit challenge to those U.S. educators who insist smaller class-size should be a high reform priority. Among the many subthemes of their discussion is the Japanese reliance on "cooperative learning," but whereas in the United States the teacher often turns group work over to pupil leaders, in Japan the teacher carefully structures and supervises the several groups.

Gay Garland Reed contrasts the systematic moral education provided in Chinese schools with the aversion to such education in the United States. Her discussion explores three areas of contrast between the two societies: the relationship of morality and religion, the relationship of fact and value, and the relationship of the individual to the society.

Lynn Paine discusses Chinese teachers and the training they receive. She notes that China, just as the United States, has from the early eighties, devoted much attention to educational reform, and especially to the reform of teaching. She finds that China's reformers have tended to think of this reform as largely a technical issue, and that they have been blind to the deeply rooted culture of teaching with its economic, social, and political supports. As in the United States, China's reformers propose "external control and accountability systems" to induce change in teacher practice. But

they typically fail to gain teacher acceptance for these systems, and thus teachers find ways to blunt the impact. She argues that it is equally important in China as it is in the United States to engage in the steady work of educational reform.

## Secondary Education

Nobuo Shimahara begins the section on secondary education with a review of recent Japanese human resource policy discussions which finds that, *contrary to recent U.S. thinking, Japanese policymakers believe they need to loosen standards in order to promote greater diversity in youth learning experiences*. He reviews several new high school concepts that have been launched or are under consideration that seek to promote this diversity. As a footnote, it is interesting to note that Japanese reformers were able during the eighties to develop a national consensus on desirable reform directions but they at that time failed to make much dent on the system (Schopa, 1989). But over the past several years, apparently due to the disarray of party politics and hence the inattention of party politicians to educational affairs, many national and local educational officials are pushing through a variety of promising reforms.

Gerald K. LeTendre, drawing on extensive qualitative research in Japanese middle schools, tackles another sacred cow of American education, *the role of school counselors*. He notes that Japanese middle schools face an alarming incidence of misbehavior, often involving some pupils "bullying" others. Rather than rely on professional counselors to work with the deviant children as in the United States, the Japanese schools rely on counseling by classroom teachers backed up by school-community committees. The goal of this counseling is to restore the deviant to the classroom group rather than to administer punishment. LeTendre reports considerable success with this approach, and thus the incidence of deviance declines as the children proceed to high school. He also observes that some U.S. high schools are experimenting with similar approaches, and initially report improvement.

In reaction to the extensive comparative literature which argues that the Asian approach to human resource development has been different than that observed in other parts of the world, David Baker and Donald Holsinger review recent evidence on educational expansion over the 1960–90 period. They find that some Asian countries had relatively high enrollment rates in 1960, but that the annual rate of expansion in Asia since then has not been exceptional. Two case studies compare recent educational trends in Thailand and Malaysia. Malaysia has taken significant steps to modernize and expand

secondary education, while Thailand has been less innovative. The authors suggest that Malaysia's efforts will be rewarded as the superior preparation of the Malaysian labor force will contribute to greater competitiveness. The authors reject the notion that there is a special Asian approach, but rather that history shows a close link between educational improvement and economic development in all parts of the world. Implicit in their observations is a warning that the United States also needs to continually renew its secondary schools if it wishes to remain competitive.

### **Private Education**

Recent international interest in *alternatives to public education* leads William K. Cummings to survey private education in Eastern Asia. He finds that private education is quite prevalent in Asia, particularly at the secondary and tertiary levels and, moreover, continues to rapidly expand. Indeed in several Asian countries, over 75 percent of the places in postsecondary education are provided by private schools. Cummings observes that the vigor of the private sector both enables the public sector to contain costs and also stimulates policymakers to consider new approaches, such as secondary schools that combine both lower and upper secondary levels in an integrated curriculum.

Nancy Ukai Russell focuses on a particular sector of Asian private education, the informal schools (*Juku* in Japan, *Hagwon* in Korea, and *Buxiban* in Taiwan) established to supplement formal education. In all of these countries, they are a booming industry; in Japan, they now are reported to add \$14 billion to the GNP, and presumably a significant increment to the national IQ quantum. Ukai notes that some Japanese firms are achieving success in *exporting their informal school technology to the United States*, and she suggests this may contribute to improvements in the quality of education in the U.S.

### **Education and Society**

Sam Stern, who has looked extensively at the relationship between education and work in Japan, writes about the education-industry interface there in direct comparison with U.S. practice. He notes that Japan has had a policy for nearly 100 years in this area, whereas the United States, as illustrated in the School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994, is only in the early stages of developing a policy. A fundamental difference between the two systems is the higher evaluation in the United States of occupation-specific skills as contrasted with Japan's respect for company-specific skills. This difference

accounts for the greater interest of Japanese employers in providing training. Stern suggests several implications for the United States, including the need for better understanding of the value of training and for greater focus and specificity in government-supported training programs.

Kin Bing Wu surveys education policies in Taiwan (China) and Hong Kong, two of the four Newly Industrialized Economies of East Asia, in order to provide the *context for understanding the diversity of educational policies and learning outcomes in the region*. She concludes that Taiwan's policies provide the foundation for movement into a new era of high-tech competitiveness, whereas Hong Kong will be less successful in this regard. With a generous leap of imagination, it is possible to apply the same strategy of comparative analysis to pairs of American states such as Ohio and Michigan, Massachusetts and Connecticut, and North Carolina and South Carolina. Some will be winners in the new era of global competition, while others will falter.

While the focus of the above studies is on the education-employer nexus, Chris Wheeler and his colleagues consider the *link of schools to the local community*. They observe that Thai schools have traditionally occupied an influential position in community life, yet many of the educational policies of the past century have tended to build up artificial barriers between school and community. In an interesting ongoing experiment, a number of schools in Thailand have sought with considerable success to break down the barrier, releasing the talents of school teachers and pupils to grapple with the challenge of forest depletion. Wheeler and his colleagues see a parallel between the recent Thai experience and that of many U.S. communities, where schools have tended to withdraw from local involvement. Under the right conditions and with the right strategy, they argue that schools can become a positive force for local improvement.

### Systemwide Implications

Thomas Rohlen, author of a well-known study of the Japanese high school, begins this section with a useful caution that *it is important in approaching a foreign educational system to understand it in its entirety before focusing on specific practices*. Rohlen suggests we are moving into a new global era where the education of nations will be judged in terms of their contribution to national competitiveness. This is a new preoccupation for American education with its traditional humanistic and self-realizing concerns, and thus may strain the tolerance of the U.S. educational establishment. In contrast, Rohlen points out, significant elements of the Japanese educational establish-

ment have been concerned with competitiveness since the Meiji Restoration (1868). Japan's concern to rely on human resources for catching up has resulted in the shaping of an educational system that is, comparatively speaking, well tuned for providing critical human resources correspondent with the changing needs of the global economy, and at reasonable cost. Thus Rohlen urges a rethinking of the goals of education, as a preliminary to evaluating the implications of Japanese and Asian education. More specifically, he notes the educational benefits of a nationwide consensus on curriculum, a minimum of tracking, the stick and carrot of high stakes examinations, and the pay-off from greater time-on-task both in and outside the school.

S. Gopinathan discusses *Singapore's strategy for nation-building and modernization*. He points out that Singapore's economy is based on human resources and that the state has taken an active role in guiding Singapore's very impressive economic development during the past two decades, and that the state has also been a central force in educational policy and planning. Education is emphasized and public funds have been spent to ensure educational opportunity and excellence. The government controls the curriculum and supervises both public and private educational sectors. Singapore's government has successfully attempted to combine the traditional Confucian emphasis on education with the contemporary need for high-tech skills. Gopinathan especially stresses the role of Singapore's education in fostering common values and norms, and he suggests there is need in the United States to revive earlier chapters in U.S. educational history, when there was a similar unifying emphasis.

Nina Borevskaya, a leading Russian scholar, looks to China for lessons concerning the options available to educators as the surrounding economy shifts from a command to a market principle. She concludes the principle shift will be from central control to central steering combined with extensive decentralization of certain functions. Observing that the United States also is experimenting with central steering, she suggests that some of *China's experiments with middle-level coordination and with the promoting of new sanctions and incentives* may be of interest to American educators.

In the concluding essay for this part and the book, William K. Cummings, one of the co-editors, presents his own *summary of the outstanding features of Eastern Asian education* and their policy implications for the United States. Much of what Cummings notes is consistent with the earlier chapters of this book—the Asian emphasis on basic education including the teaching of social values, the reliance on cooperative and wholistic learning approaches which contribute to lower per-student costs, the public sector focus on manpower and elite education, and the concern to coordinate edu-

cational outputs with labor force demand. Cummings suggests the seeming success of Asian education tends to provoke a defensive reaction among some Western educators, leading to an often exaggerated highlighting of some of the weaknesses of Asian education. Yes, there is delinquency in Asia as well as bullying and so on; but the level is not as great as some critics suggest. Perhaps the biggest challenge of Asian education is its assertion that young people are minors and should comply with the discipline and rules imposed by the schools, reflecting a more general societal preference for order over freedom. This Eastern Asian emphasis on control contrasts with the Western love of freedom. Each emphasis has its price.