

## **Distinctive Features of the Japanese Education System**

“Thus there is a general belief that a student’s performance in one crucial examination at about the age of 18 is likely to determine the rest of his life. In other words: the university entrance examination is the primary sorting device for careers in Japanese society. The result is not an *aristocracy* of birth, but a sort of *degree-ocracy*”

(OECD, Reviews of National Policies for Education: JAPAN. 1971 p.89)

What are the distinctive features of the Japanese education system? Explaining the characteristics and features of the Japanese education system to readers from other countries is not an easy task. In the process of educational development, Japan modeled its system after the developed countries in the West, and introduced many elements of the school system from those countries. Japan has a well-developed educational system in which the structure and function has much in common with many other industrialized countries.

However, it is possible to identify some characteristics that are particular to the Japanese system. In the tradition and culture of Japan, some parts of the education system often function differently from those in other countries. In its social context, some functions of the education system have been excessively exploited, and other functions have been relatively disregarded. At the same time, distinctive features represent both the strengths and weaknesses of the Japanese education system. While with the passage of time some features have changed, other features have remained unchanged for many decades.

As a point of departure, we discuss one notable work treating this topic. In an article published in 1990, Prof. Shogo Ichikawa of the National Institute for Educational Policy Research (NIER) attempts to analyze the characteristics of the Japanese education system through comparison with the United States, Europe and other countries in East Asian, pointing out eight features of the Japanese system. Twenty years have passed since this article. Have the main features of the system changed during this period? In the first section, we will discuss Ichikawa’s analysis, following which we will reexamine the distinctive features of Japanese system in terms of common features and changes during the last two decades.

### **1. Eight distinctive features by Ichikawa’s analysis**

In 1990, Ichikawa enumerated the distinctive characteristics of the Japanese education system as follows. (1) The way that schooling and school education dominate children’s and young people’s lives; (2) the privatized development of pre- and post-compulsory education and the large share of private funding for education; (3) the preference for general education under a single-track system; (4) automatic promotion between the grades based on age; (5) the low enrollment of non-Japanese students and adults in schools; (6) the high educational achievement

with low level of deviation; (7) the unique screening function of entrance examinations; and (8) the practice of autonomous school management. Let us consider each item in greater detail based on his arguments. The statistics cited by Ichikawa, which will therefore be included here, are those of the time of his writing.

### **The way that schooling and school education dominate children's lives**

One of the most distinctive features of Japanese education is that schooling is highly prevalent among the people, and occupies a position of great weight in children's and the young people's lives. Compulsory education (primary and lower secondary education) is universally completed. Moreover, 95% of teen-agers go on to upper secondary education. And 38% of the upper secondary school graduates advance to higher education. Thus, with respect to total school enrollment rates, Japan ranks high even among the developed countries. Furthermore, Japanese children spend a greater amount of time at school. In compulsory education, schools are in operation for as many as 240 days a year including Saturdays.

In teaching hours per week, Japan is on par with the average for industrialized countries. Japanese students, however, tend to stay in school after school hours to participate in extra-curricular activities or to play sports or games with their classmates, and some do not leave until the evening. In addition, Japanese students have quite a bit of homework to do. And the majority engage in various kinds of out-of-school learning activity such as private "cram schools" (*Juku*), private tutoring, correspondence education, and private cultural lessons. They devote most of their spare time to preparation or review for their lessons at school. Schools often supervise the lives of their students out of school. Some schools occasionally send teachers and volunteer parents to patrol the streets and downtown area to protect against vicious practices and juvenile delinquency. Generally, the parents and the other people in the community expect the schools to play an extensive role and to assume a heavy responsibility including instilling discipline and moral standards in their students.

### **The privatized development of pre- and post-compulsory education and the large share of private funding for education**

The second feature is the considerable development of private educational institutions and the large share of private funding that goes to education. At the compulsory education level, the proportion of students attending private primary and lower secondary schools is only about 0.65% and 3%, respectively. This is smaller than that in European countries and many other developing countries. At these levels of education, public schools certainly dominate. Meanwhile, at the upper secondary education and higher education levels, share of enrollment in private institutions grows higher and higher. Particularly, at the higher education level, enrollment in the private institutions of higher education is eminently high. Private enrollment constitutes about 72% of university enrollment, 90% of junior college enrollment and 93% of specialized training schools. These private higher education institutions charge a fair amount of tuition fees, and it falls on the student's households to cover them. The Japanese government

has adopted a policy that favors compulsory education by giving it a greater share in its education budget. For example, in the United States, nearly 30% of public educational expenditures are allotted to higher education, but in Japan, the proportion is only 10%. Also, 76% of kindergartens, which are not a part of the compulsory education system in Japan, are in the private sector. The predominance of the private sector at both ends of the education system is a unique feature of Japanese education.

In addition, a great many of Japanese children go to private cram schools on evenings and/or weekends to supplement or catch up with their school lessons. Also, many students attend various kinds of private training centers to take lessons on such activities as playing the piano, painting, dance, swimming, computers, and calligraphy. There exists a large market for these “educational industry”. These learning activities amount to no small expenses for the household. Generally, Japanese families prioritize their children’s education and show a great readiness to invest in schooling. As a result of the relatively equitable distribution of income throughout the period of high economic growth, the average household has become able to bear these educational expenses without experiencing too heavy a burden.

### **The Preference for general education under a single-track system**

The third feature is that schools offer a common (general education-oriented) curriculum for all students under a single-track system. At the upper secondary education level, students have the option of academic (general), vocational, and specialized programs, but the content of the curricula does not vary widely with the type of program.

Japan’s single-track school system dates back to 1872 when first modern education regulation (the Education system Ordinance) was set forth. Since that time, Japan has maintained the principle of not splitting the first stage of education into two subsystems, one for the elite and one for the masses. Although at the first stage of development of education in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were various types of programs and schools for elementary education, the national government was able to establish a system of common ordinary elementary schools for all children by 1900. The task of establishing a comprehensive secondary education system was achieved in 1943 when the government promulgated “The Secondary School Order”. The idea underlying this order was that no class distinction should be drawn between general education and vocational education or between schools for boys and schools for girls. The government declared that Japanese institutions for secondary education were all equal in status, with differences only in curriculum. Japan’s effort at unifying secondary education had, therefore, already met with success during the Second World War.

At the primary and lower secondary education levels, all schools offer a general education, and students are not given the opportunity for vocational training. At the upper secondary education level, general, vocational and specialized programs (agriculture, industry, commerce, fishing, home economics, nursing, and social services, etc.) are provided. The proportion of students enrolled in academic programs has been increasing, and in 1990, it accounted for nearly three-quarters of all students. Furthermore, even in the vocational programs, more than

half of the total teaching hours are allotted to non-vocational academic subjects. Contrary to the image that other countries have of Japan, Japanese school education is remarkably free from narrow vocational skill training. In general, Japanese companies and factories have their own in-company training systems, and they tend to demand that graduates who are hired into the companies have acquired basic and fundamental competencies.

#### **Adoption of automatic promotion between the grades based on age**

The fourth characteristic is that Japanese schools have adopted an automatic promotion system wherein students move on to the next grade based on age. In contrast with some European countries and many developing countries, in Japan, classmates in primary and lower secondary schools proceed automatically to the next grade every year, almost irrespective of their educational achievements, and then graduate all together after the prescribed period. In compulsory education, Japanese schools neither allow the gifted or fast learners to skip a grade ahead of their classmates, nor do they force the slow learners to repeat a grade.

In the upper secondary education, entrance examinations to individual schools perform the function of sorting the applicants out. Consequently, educational standards vary among schools, whereas their curricula are almost the same throughout the country. Although it is natural for schools at the middle or bottom of the hierarchy to have a considerable number of students whose educational achievements are appreciably below the norm, they are rarely left behind, or made to repeat the grades on the basis of their poor results. The problem of students dropping out of upper secondary schools has recently become a matter of public debate. However, the annual ratio of dropouts is estimated to be only 2%, whereas more than 90% of upper secondary school students manage to complete their programs. At the higher education level, nearly 80% of undergraduates obtain their first degree without repeating a grade, and about 90% of them finally manage to graduate.

#### **Low enrollment of non-Japanese students and adults in schools**

The fifth feature is that Japanese schools and classrooms are composed of an almost homogeneous group of students. The formal education system caters only to Japanese children, adolescents, and youths. In contrast with most other countries, where a heterogeneous group of learners that includes many immigrant children are enrolled in schools, the group of students in the classroom is exceptionally homogeneous in both its cultural background and physical and mental development. The number of non-Japanese students remains minimal in Japanese schools and universities. In 1989, the number of international students studying in Japanese institutions of higher education was 33,669 and these constituted only 1.3% of the total number of students. Non-Japanese children who were enrolled in Japanese kindergartens, and primary and secondary schools amounted to 90,246 and accounted for 0.4% of all children.

Meanwhile, with the automatic promotion system and low repetition rate mentioned above, only a few students over the prescribed age attend upper secondary schools. There used to be a number of adults taking evening courses or correspondence courses at upper secondary schools,

but the numbers have been declining as the enrollment rate in full-time courses has been rising. In higher education, as well, the number of postgraduate students is relatively small in spite of the expansion of higher education, and mature adult students participating in recurrent education are a minority in Japanese universities.

### **High levels of educational achievement with low levels of deviation**

The sixth feature of Japanese education is the high level of standardized achievement with little deviation in schools at the compulsory education level. The international surveys of educational achievement in mathematics and science, that were conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) in 1964 and 1970, demonstrated that the scores gained by Japanese students were exceptionally high among the developed countries and the dispersion rate of the results was exceptionally small.

Teachers dedicate themselves to their work and undertake extensive tasks including extracurricular activities. They tend to treat all students impartially and refrain from favoring gifted children. They have won the respect of the public and enjoy a high social status, secure positions and good salaries. Differences in learning conditions vary minimally from one geographic area to another. Schools in remote and isolated areas have been provided with special financial treatment for improving and upgrading their difficult conditions. School curricula, facilities and equipment, teacher qualifications and salaries, and public expenditures per students are almost the same throughout the country.

Japanese schools, especially, those in the public sector, are oriented towards extreme egalitarianism. On the other hand, most parents want an education that can assist in developing the abilities and aptitudes of their children. A part of these demands on the part of the parents are satisfied by a small number of private schools and private tutoring schools. In Japanese education, therefore, both the public and private sectors have been playing their respective roles, with the former taking an egalitarian approach following the official policy line, and the latter taking a differential approach in response to individual demand. The private sector exists by providing an educational service that the other sector neglects, which in turn allows the public sector to devote its efforts to the pursuit of equality.

### **The unique screening function of entrance examinations**

The seventh distinction is the emphasis that the Japanese education system places on entrance examinations as a unique screening function. In Japan, there is no general certificate of secondary education such as a Baccalaureate, Abitur, or GCE in European countries, that qualifies the holders to go on to higher education. Applicants for upper secondary schools or institutions of higher education gain admission after taking a selective, school-specific entrance examination that is mainly composed of a written achievement test. As most of the students at the compulsory education level are promoted almost automatically from grade to grade and the screening function is thus inhibited within the schools, students are only sorted by their achievements during the transition from one educational level to the next.

Both at home and abroad, harsh criticism has often been directed at this screening mechanism on the grounds that it has caused overheated competition and hindered the potential for diversification in Japanese education. Surely, the excessive competition for entry to the best schools or top-class universities has inflicted psychological stress on both children and parents. This intensified competition has often been referred to in the media as “examination hell.” However, competition for admission to higher levels of education is not as severe as it is rumored to be. Upper secondary schools have large enough capacities to admit all applicants, and even junior colleges have room for almost all applicants. Half of junior college students are admitted at the sole recommendation of their secondary schools. Moreover, by a rough estimation, about 90% of newly graduated applicants would be enrolled in universities anyway if it were not for the so-called *ronin*, who have failed in their first attempts at the entrance examinations for their first-choice universities, and put off entering another university so that they can study and try again in the following years. Thus, there is no fundamental shortage of space or capacity in Japanese institutions of post-compulsory education.

Of course, the annual entrance examinations provoke a great interest among the population. University entrance examinations are nation-wide events in Japan. A great number of students who are finishing or have already finished secondary school apply to take examinations from all over the country and the mass media never fails to report on this sensational event. The extent to which the Japanese media focuses on the topic of entrance examination may seem puzzling to observers in the West. The mass media have helped to create the illusion that entrance examinations are the central issue in Japanese education.

### **The practice of autonomous school management**

The final feature of the system is that in school management, Japanese schools tend to make important decisions at staff meetings in each school, and schools have a tendency to resist interference from outsiders. Although school principals are formally empowered by law to manage their schools, actual decision-making with regards to school management is carried out with the mutual consent of the teaching and non-teaching staff members. In Japanese schools, staff meetings are held quite frequently and regularly.

Furthermore, schools have virtual autonomy in their own management, with little interference from boards of education or local communities. Although every primary and secondary school has a parent-teacher association (PTA), there is no advisory council of parents to express their wishes and opinions on the management of the schools such as exists in British schools’ governing bodies.

## **2. Common features and change over the last two decades**

This article on the distinctive features of Japanese education written by a highly regarded researcher seems to be a penetrating and well-balanced one and the majority of people would agree with his analysis. Twenty years have passed since then. Are these features that were

pointed out twenty years ago still dominating the present Japanese system? Some of the features that have their roots in the tradition and culture of Japan are not likely to change easily. However, some features could change due to a shift in the socio-economic conditions of Japanese society. In certain sense, the government's educational policies may have promoted their transformation. Here, we attempt to reconsider these eight features from a viewpoint of the continuity and change over the last two decades.

### **Assertion of and emphasis on latitude or *Yutori***

Firstly, further progress has been achieved in the quantitative expansion of education. In 2009, almost all (97.9%) of teen-agers continued to upper secondary education, and 77.6% of upper secondary school graduates advance to higher education. In the sense of schooling occupying a position of great weight in children's and young people's lives, however, some changes have been observed. In the controversy on education reform in the 1990s, criticisms was leveled at the excessive way that schooling and education was dominating children's lives. It was argued that children had hardworking and busy lives at school, and that even after school hours they were under a lot of stress and strain because of pressure from school. One of the main themes of discussion on education at the time was that how to secure "*Yutori*" (latitude) in the lives of the children and their families. In order for them to have "*Yutori*" in their school lives, Saturday classes were gradually stepped down beginning from 1992, and in 2002 the five-day school week was completely implemented. Also, in the 2002, in revised curriculum for primary and lower secondary schools, the educational content was cut back by around 30%, and the total number of teaching hours in a school year at the compulsory education level was reduced.

### **The increasing share of private schools and private funding for education**

The second, third, and fourth features, namely, the development of a considerable number of private schools and the large share of private funding for education; the common (general education-oriented) curriculum for all students in a single-track system; and automatic promotions to the next grade, saw few changes.

In 2009, enrollment rate in private education institutions represented 80.8% of the total student population at the kindergarten level, 1.1% at the primary education level, 7.2% at the lower secondary education level, and 29.4% in the upper secondary education level. At the higher education level, private sector enrollment constituted 73.4% of university, and 93.8% of junior college enrollment. At all education levels, the percentages of enrollment in private institutions show a slight rise. Especially at the lower secondary education level, the share of private school enrollment has almost doubled from 3.8% to 7.2%. The extent of the private funding for education is also increasing. According to the OECD annual survey on education financing, in 2007, public expenditures on education as a percentage of GDP in Japan was 3.3%, the lowest among OECD member countries, where the OECD average is 4.8%. Conversely, the private share, including household expenditures on education was at 1.6%, which is among the highest, following after Korea, Chile and the United States. The tendency to depend on private

education institutions and on private funding for education seems to have grown stronger.

### **Increase in number of students with multi-cultural backgrounds**

The fifth characteristic, the homogeneous composition of the student population, is gradually changing. Due to progress in internationalization of Japanese society in recent decades, on one hand, the profile of non-Japanese students enrolled in Japan's classrooms has changed, and on the other, the number of international students enrolled at institutions of higher education has rapidly increased.

The number of non-Japanese students enrolled in compulsory education in Japan is about 80,000, and this constitutes less than 1% of the total number of students of that age group. This would tend to show that the overall circumstances wherein a great majority of Japanese schools and classrooms were composed of homogeneous Japanese students have not changed. However, the profile and composition of the non-Japanese students are drastically changing and this requires that schools take different measures for them. For historical reasons, the great majority of the foreign students enrolled in Japanese public schools have been ethnic Koreans. Many of their families have lived in Japan for generations and their proficiency in Japanese has not been an issue. Japanese schools did not need to give them special instructional treatment in the classroom.

It is quite another story now. In 1990, the Immigration Control Law was revised, and this made it easier for foreign workers, particularly those of Japanese ancestry from Latin American countries, to work in Japan. From then on, many ethnic Japanese workers from Latin American, particularly those from Brazil and Peru, have come to the land of their forefathers, accompanied by their families. They tend to live together in particular cities and areas where factories of the manufacture are located. And their children tend to enroll in local Japanese public schools. Most of these "new comers" and their families have not had high proficiencies in Japanese. Japanese schools have to take measures to deal with this new issue. Students who need special instruction in Japanese language in the classroom have been increasing, and amounted to 28,500 in 2008. Japanese schools face a new challenge in the increasing enrollment of children with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Due to the government's policy of encouraging institutions of higher education to actively invite students from overseas and due to the positive attitude toward this in individual education institutions, the number of non-Japanese and international students in Japanese higher education has increased rapidly. The number of non-Japanese students enrolled in universities, graduate schools, and junior colleges increased from 38,444 (28,560 of whom were international students) in 1990 to 105,340 (95,303 international students) in 2008. The proportion of non-Japanese student enrollment in Japanese higher education accounts for 3.5% of the total. Although this ratio is still low compared with many Western countries, it is clear that the increasing number of non-Japanese students have some influence on the country's university culture.

### **Controversy over academic ability**

The sixth feature mentioned was the high educational achievement with little deviation seen in Japanese schools, but this has changed slightly, and Japan's reputation and recognition among educators has become slightly shaky. A number of university science and engineering professors have expressed their dissatisfaction and anxiety over their students' academic abilities, alleging that their level of knowledge in science and mathematics has clearly diminished compared to the previous generation. On the other hand, it has also been argued that there is no objective data demonstrating that young people's levels of academic achievement have fallen. Some people are anxious over the results of OECD-PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment). According to the 2003 results, Japanese' 15-years olds ranked among the top class in science and mathematics. However, in reading literacy, the Japanese students dropped to a rank below other Asian countries such as Hong Kong and South Korea, and were no longer ranked among the best in the world. Controversy over students' academic abilities has continued. And in the new curriculum for primary school and junior secondary school announced by the Ministry of Education in March 2008, which are scheduled to be implemented from April 2011, the total number of teaching hours at both school levels will be increased by around 10%.

### **Changing circumstances for entrance examinations**

The seventh characteristic of the amount of emphasis being put on the unique screening function of entrance examinations has changed in the direction of alleviating overheated competitions. Amidst an expanding life-long learning system and an increasing number of adult students going back to study in post-graduate education programs, social tensions surrounding entrance examinations have reduced. The traditional Japanese social practices of lifetime employment and the seniority system have been changing. As Japanese organizations introduce more versatile and multi-phased merit rating system for their personnel, social customs that previously gave preferential treatment to the graduates of a handful of reputable universities are gradually lessening in importance. Universities have also tried to diversify the entrance examination system and its procedures. Today, in addition to the traditional type of written achievement test, many universities have adopted a combination of various admission procedures, such as admission upon recommendation, selection by the admission offices, the National Center Test for University Admission, and essay tests. Media coverage of university entrance examinations is also less prevalent.

### **School leaders and opening up schools to the community**

The last feature, that of practically autonomous school management, has also changed. Although the school staff meetings are still held regularly, there is a general tendency to look on them not as the forum for decision-making, but rather for consulting with or assisting the school principal in regard to school management. To support the principal's school management, a set of managerial posts in the schools, such as vice-principal, head teacher, chief teacher, and advising teacher, have been set in place, and the roles and authority of these school leaders are

respected. The hierarchic structure of the schools has been reinforced. For a long time, teacher unions have been losing their organizational power, and have little influence on the daily activities of the schools.

On the other hand, opportunities for parent and community participation in school management have expanded. In 2000, a School Councilors system was introduced at each school level, as a new way to promote communication and cooperation among schools, parents, and the community. According to regulations, people recommended by the principal are appointed as school council members. Councilors are able to voice their opinions about the school's management when the principal asks for input. In 2004, another type of forum for participation, called the School Management Council was initiated. Local education boards of education designate the schools in which School Management Councils should be established. The council members are appointed from among local community members, parents of the students, and the people recommended by the board of education. School Management Councils system have more power than School Councilors as they can present opinions on the management of the school and on the hiring and transferring of teaching staff to the board of education and the principal. These attempts aim to bring about a new partnership between the school and the community.

### **3. Are these distinctive features advantages or disadvantages?**

In the last two decades, as a whole, the distinctive features of Japanese education have not changed drastically. As described above, some changes have been observed, but it seems to be a difference of degree rather than in kind. These features are firmly rooted in Japanese culture and the social structure, and as such, they are interrelated to make up Japanese education as a whole.

According to Ichikawa, these features constitute both advantages and disadvantages to Japanese education, like two sides of the same coin. A given feature may have both positive and negative aspects and it is almost impossible to separate its weaknesses from its strengths. For example, parents' readiness to provide their children with a good education at any expense deserves praise, but it has also intensified competition among students. Moreover, it is generally conceded that intensive preparation for entrance examinations causes undue stress for the students, it also helps them develop such positive habits as careful work, self-discipline, diligence, and perseverance. It is also claimed that egalitarianism and group consciousness in the schools contribute to a high standard of student achievement, but that at the same time, they hamper the development of individuality and creativity. In the same way, while centralized educational administration and finance is criticized as the main cause of the uniformity in Japanese education, it is also considered to be helpful in maintaining a high national standard of education with few differences in conditions throughout the country. In recent controversy, Japanese education has been waving like a swinging pendulum between seeking for *Yutori* and asserting the value of a more certain academic ability.

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## 日本の教育システムの特質（記述の要点）

日本は、教育システムの形成と発展の時期に、西欧諸国から多くの要素を取り入れたため、そのシステムにおいて、これらの国と類似した構造と機能を備えている。だが、そうしたシステムにも、日本に特有の文化や伝統の中で、同じような組織が他の国とは異なる働きをし、また、さまざまな機能の比重が異なるなどいくつかの独特の特質を指摘することができる。かつて1990年に、研究所の次長をつとめた市川昭午は、国際比較の観点から日本の教育システムの特色を分析した、すぐれた論文を書き、その中で、日本の教育の特質を八つの観点から指摘した。それから20年の時間が経過している。市川が指摘した日本の教育の特質といわれるものは、この間に、変化を遂げてきたのか、それとも、不変であったのか。ここでは、まず市川の分析を紹介するとともに、それらの特質を、この20年間における変化と継続性という観点から再検討する。

### 1. 市川による8つの特質の指摘

- ① 学校生活が子どもの生活をおおい尽くしていること
- ② 私学の発展と民間による教育費負担が大きいこと
- ③ 単線型で同一の教育課程を履修していること
- ④ 年齢基準に基づく同時進級をさせていくこと
- ⑤ 主要な対象が日本人の未成年者に絞られていること
- ⑥ 平均的な学習成果が高くしかも比較的均質であること
- ⑦ 人材選抜の機能が入学試験に集中していること
- ⑧ 内部参加型の学校運営であること

### 2. 最近20年間における継続と変化

- ① ゆとり教育の主張と探求、
- ② 私学の比率と民間の教育費負担の拡大
- ③～④ 大きな変化なし
- ⑤ 多文化的背景を持った児童生徒、留学生の増大
- ⑥ 学力論争の出現
- ⑦ 入学試験をめぐる環境の変化
- ⑧ 学校の職階制化と父母・地域社会の参加

### 3. 特質は長所が短所か

この20年間における変化は、本質的なものというよりも、程度の問題であり、市川の指摘した日本の教育の特質は、大きくは変わっていない。また、各特質には、短所と長所という側面があり、これらを個別に切り離して、短所・欠点の是正を図ることはかならずしも容易なことではない。