

EDUCATION REFORM IN JAPAN: WAYS TOWARDS QUALITY

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Japan has, like many other countries, involved in reforming attempts in order to make schools more accountable, which have continued to experience a series of major changes to the structure, organization, and content of education system. School days in public schools are going to be reduced from 6-days a week to 5-days a week. In accordance with this reduction, the modification of curricular frame is already scheduled. Devolution of authority and responsibility from the central will be introduced gradually.

Notwithstanding that the effect of these reforms would be dramatic, the foundation of organizational culture known as Theory J (Japanese) would exist even with some modification, because of the cultural background in Japan, i.e. cultural homogeneity.

This work is designed to contribute to our knowledge about the way of improving school management. And this paper is to focus on organizational culture and structure in order to point out why the concern for leadership is still underdeveloped in Japan.

EDUCATION SYSTEM IN JAPAN

The formal education system in Japan includes kindergarten (*Yochien*), elementary schools (*Shogakko*), lower secondary schools (*Chugakko*), upper secondary schools (*Kotogakko*), and institutions as higher education (*Daigaku*).

Most elementary schools, lower secondary schools, and special schools for handicapped are public schools founded and supervised by local government, while the share of private sector is significant in the rest of education levels. The share of public schools is relatively larger in upper secondary school (about 75% in statistics of 1999), whereas private schools share more than public schools in both kindergarten (about 60%) and higher education institutions (about 75%). There are some state schools established by the central government in each education levels. The number, however, is quite small.

All children are required by law to be in full-time formal education between the ages of 6 and 15. This compulsory education for 9-years is formed by 6 years in elementary school and another 3 years in lower secondary school. And furthermore, there is a large demand for formal education both before and after compulsory education. Most children begin their

pre-school education either in kindergarten at the age of 3, or in nursery institutions as a part of social welfare, and afterwards enter into compulsory education. Almost all students (over 95%) will continue their learning as the post-compulsory education, in upper secondary schools for 3-years through entrance examination. And then more than a half of students will continue their further education in either university/college or vocational training, through entrance examination.

CULTURAL BACKGROUND

It would be no doubt to characterize the Japanese society as cultural homogeneity; relatively, mono-culture, mono-ethnic, and welfare state. (Benjamin 1997, 512).

It would be also the well-known fact that Japan is a country without social cleavages based on race, ethnicity, caste, language, or religion. This contributes to strong cultural agreement regarding the forms and goals of education.

Japanese society is a meritocracy shaped by an educational competition that enrolls nearly everyone. (Rohlen 1986, 30). There is a strong cultural consensus that education provides a valid criterion by which roles in society can be allocated. The education system should ideally be the institution which provides all students with a 'level playing field' of opportunity, in which each individual has an equal chance to obtain the highest level of achievement possible, and which will help meet the needs of society. The highest rewards, as well as the most responsible positions, should go to those who do well in the educational system. (Benjamin 1997, 512). In other words, educational credentials and skills are key to employment, social status, and promotion in the business community. This accounts for the paramount importance the Japanese attach to education. (Shimahara 1997, 95).

There is unusual consensus on the goals and means of education (Benjamin 1997, 511), although there is a relatively differentiated public and private division of schools and students, and variations between individual schools in each sector. Most of anthropologist researchers put the uniformity of curriculum and practice into one of the features of Japanese education system.

Behind this feature, there is the premise that humans as individuals are all endowed with basically the same traits and abilities, so that development is less a matter of the unfolding of various individual characteristics than of

reaction to the social environment and the effort expended to meet goals. (Singleton 1984, cited from Benjamin 1997, 512).

Inherent in this view are the assumptions that education and educational environment are important, that educational opportunities will not be 'wasted' on any individuals, and that educational institutions are responsible for the learning of their pupils. (Benjamin 1997, 512).

Educational achievement is prompted by a broad societal and educational infrastructure, of which formal schooling is just one part. (Shimahara 1997, 95). Even so, some strong arguments might be raising up in the Japanese context. Are pupils not steered to the areas that are easy for them? Are mathematics, music, reading, art, or gymnastics all approached in the same way, as skills to be mastered through hard work, with talent playing a minor role? Are natural differences of endowment nearly insignificant? Will all learners benefit equally from the same careful curriculum?

CONCEPT OF EDUCATION REFORM

The basic strategy in Japanese education reform for the last decade is that it has been planning and implementing to be closely linked in a united fashion with another major reforms, i.e. governmental administration, economic structure, financial system, social welfare system, and fiscal structure. It is expected as a whole system restructuring in every public sector, not only in the field of education.

'Program for Education Reform' was made by Ministry of Education, in order to make clear and take responsibility on the development of reform issues. This reform program was made first in 1997, and has been revised each year so far in 1997, 1998, and 1999.

Two points of the utmost importance are emphasized in this program as follows,

1. To promote various and flexible measures as much as possible in education system.
2. To look outside beyond the school's frame of reference to acquire broader views, and tackle the tasks of educational reform with such an open attitude.

The ongoing reform has programmed and will implement along these points. Some directions are set and explained in the program:

1. Cultivation of rich humanity and reform of educational system with unconventional mind, e.g. enhancement of 'emotional education',

initiation of a unified lower and upper secondary school system, reform of school curriculum in view of the comprehensive 5-day school week, response to the information age.

2. Prompt responses to changing social needs, e.g. response to the aging society with declining birth rate, training of promising talents for the advancement of science and technology in the future.
3. School's active cooperation with communities, e.g. strengthening of cooperative relationship between schools, families, and communities, promotion of volunteer activities, more local talents to school education.
4. Promotion of 'internationalization' by student exchange and other measures, e.g. improvement of English and other foreign language education, enhancement of teacher's international experience and contribution.
5. Setting up a forum with business community for the expansion of the educational reform movement. It will be discussed in the forum with the agendas, e.g. revising overemphasis of academic career when recruiting, encouraging fathers to participate in educational activities at home, supporting lifelong learning activities for their employees.

In the reform program set by central government, it is explicitly based on the perception that education makes the foundation of all social systems, and then the concept of school should be clearly based on the system of social interaction. This could be defined as the social-systems model of school, i.e. the school organization is characterized by an interdependence of parts, a clearly defined population, differentiation from its environment, a complex network of social relationships, and its own unique. (Hoy and Miskel 1996, 34).

School reform in the progress has been focused on meeting the exigencies of a much more diverse society, where changes in people's lives resulting from the impact of globalization and the information industry. (Shimahara 1997, 97). Consequently, education policies would emphasize much more to introduce some diversity and choice in schooling.

The schooling scheme in both teaching and learning are likely to be changing, as pointed out in many countries. Here in Table 1, I display some points in a diagram, excerpted from the work originally with Danish perspectives.

In many countries, the issues of school management and leadership have been focused on one of important key fields to make education reform into

Education Reform in Japan: Ways Towards Quality

After reform: Progressive	Before reform: Traditional
Integrated subject matter	Separate subject matter
Teacher as guide to educational experience	Teacher as distributor of knowledge
Active pupil role	Passive pupil role
Pupils participate in curriculum planning	Pupils have no say in curriculum planning
Learning predominantly by discovery techniques	Accent on memory, practice, and rote
External rewards and punishments not necessary, i.e. intrinsic motivation	External rewards used, e.g. grades, i.e. extrinsic motivation
Not too concerned with conventional academic standards	Concerned with academic standards
Little testing	Regular testing
Accent on cooperative group work	Accent on competition
Teaching not confined to classroom base	Teaching confined to classroom base
Accent on creative expression	Little emphasis on creative expression
Cognitive and affective domains given equal emphasis	Cognitive domain is emphasized; affective is neglected
Process is valued	Little attention paid to process

Table 1: Comparison between after and before reform. Source: Kyrstein 1999.

effective. Unlike these countries, the view on this field seems still unclear in Japan. Only minor insight can be found in the reform program under the topic on revitalization plan of local administration system. The phrase on this topic is prospected both to promote more flexible and progressive into local administration of education, and to build up more initiative and inventive practices into school organizations. However, program on this part seems to be quite vague. Ironically speaking, this unclear program setting might have a real purpose to encourage tremendous creative thoughts in this field.

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AND STRUCTURE:
CHARACTERISTICS IN JAPAN

Why the concern for educational leadership is so limited as referring above? I will explore some answers in organizational culture and structure.

With regard to this context, the characteristics in business organizations are illustrated in many ways. Here in Table 2 is one result of comparative

Theory J (Japanese)	Theory A (American)
Lifetime employment	Short-term employment
Non-specialized career paths – developing transferable skills	Specialized career paths – narrowly defined roles
Consensual decision making	Individual decision making
Emphasis on collective decision making	Focus on individual responsibility
Implicit, informal appraisal	Frequent formal appraisal
Collective responsibility	Rapid promotion (often stemming from high turnover)
Comprehensive concern for people	Segmented concern for people

Table 2. Organizational culture. Source: Ouchi 1981 in Law and Glover 2000.

insights through the contrast between major Japanese companies (Theory J: Japanese) and major American companies (Theory A: American).

It should be noted as a caution that such distinctions should not be applied rigidly, especially in education. Because many organizations incorporate elements of both approaches, i.e. ‘conceptual pluralism’. (Law and Glover 2000, 111).

Nevertheless, it explains one of the reasons why somewhat different culture and structure can be found in the education system. The fundamental features extracted from the comparative aspect could lead us to find one of the responses to questions.

I will refer to three characteristics of organizational culture and structure in Japan:

1. assignment of working task,
2. recruitment and mobility of positions, and
3. resource allocation among positions. (Ishida 1992, 242).

Assignment of working task

Each member holds the assigned work in the organization. Organization consists of collectivity of individual work assigned each member.

This organizational structure can be displayed as shown in Figure 1a. A range of each working task and responsibility (each square) is described explicitly as much as possible. The vague area would be found in the boundary zone at the crossing lines, but it would be very small pieces. An organization, as a whole, is constructed by these tasks.

Contrast to this structure, a typical organization in Japan seems to be constructed in a different way, as shown in Figure 1j. Whereas explicit

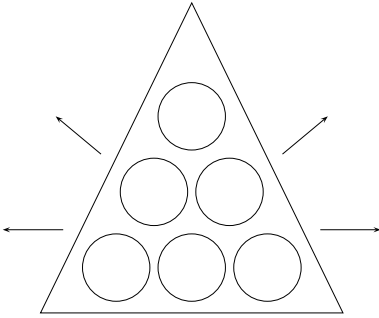


Figure 1j: J model

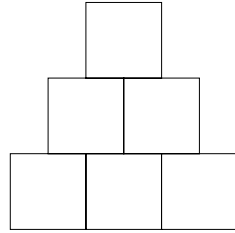


Figure 1a: A model

working tasks as an individual responsibility (each circle) are relatively less, there exists the boundary works (zone inside triangle) much more. These boundary works need to deal with interactively beyond each works explicitly allocated. Responses in this vague area will be flexible depending on the context and condition. It could be encouraging to cover those works each other progressively for accomplishing organizational tasks. In this structure it is emphasized the concept of collective responsibility than individual one.

Furthermore, the school tasks, such as transforming social norms to students, have been growing as the most reliable educational function in the society. It seems beyond the formal education function, overstepping into the responsibility of both the family and the local community, even if responding to those demands. Now is the time to reconsider what the school tasks are at the collective level.

Recruitment and mobility of positions

With regard to human resource management, there exists a dominated basic strategy in organizational structure in Japan. This can be displayed in Figure 2j.

Recruiting the member into the organization opens mostly for the beginner, and the promotion would concern more to transfer member inside than to recruit from outside. The mobility across organizations is less than the transference of member inside organization. The beginners are expected to develop their skills and to promote their career path inside organization in accordance with the experiences.

It is different in the organizational form as showed in Figure 2a. This form has a rigid classification much more between positions. Each position

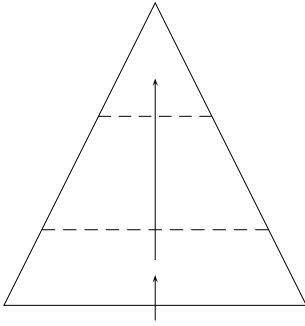


Figure 2j: J model

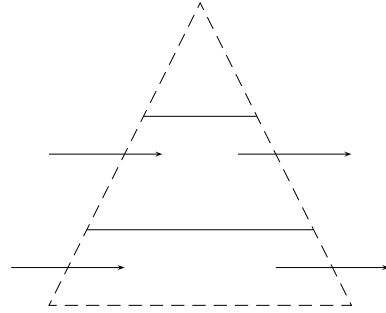


Figure 2a: A model

is classified clearly and the condition of promoting position is set by explicit knowledge-based ability. The mobility barrier across the organization could be less than the Japanese structure above. Experiences are not the straight evidence for ability to promote to higher position in this structure.

Furthermore, in case of human resource management in education, whole education community in region formed by many municipalities is much concerned in Japan than the countries where recruitment is mainly concerned on individual school base. The basic concept of this system, whole-system perspective, has the same strategy.

In addition, we can find some symbolic facts on the school leaders in Japan. (Tanabe 2000). I describe one example here: the age of school principals in Table 3.

This position is extremely dominated by those at the higher ages. For principals in public schools, an age of 60 is regulated at the retirement age. Principals over 60 in the statistics will be the final year of their professional career in public schools. It is the fact that professional experience and career are much concerned than professional knowledge and ability in the leadership position.

Resource allocation among positions

This is the point how organizational resources, such as the power, work responsibility, information, and rewards, are allocated and shared among the classified positions.

In bureaucracy model the chief executives hold higher power and information exclusively on the one hand, and they take higher responsibility on the other hand. The differences among each level of positions are very clear

Education Reform in Japan: Ways Towards Quality

Age	Public elementary schools	Public lower secondary schools	Upper secondary schools both public and private
Over 60	5.9%	7.5%	22.3%
55 to 60	55.2%	58.8%	67.8%
50 to 55	34.8%	29.6%	8.3%
Under 50	4.2%	4.0%	1.5%
Average age	55.8	56.2	58.5

Table 3. Age of principals (as of 1998). Source: Ministry of Education 1999b.

and explicit. In the result, the level of power and responsibility is divided along the position.

As compared with this model, the organizational resources are shared much more in case of school organization in each country, whatever called, e.g. professional bureaucracy model, known as Mintzberg model originally. The professional organization model encourages consensual decision making and emphasizes on collective decision making. In this situation, it is necessary to be sharing the organizational resources as much as possible. The division and gap among the level of positions would be less to some extent than the former model. The member would hold a sense of belonging in the organization, and organization concerns on member with comprehensive perspectives on the other hand.

However, this structure is one of the basic features in Japan, not only in school organization but also in most cases of another organizations. This could be emphasized more than any other countries, even we can be seen some similarities in school organizations all over the world.

CONCLUSION

As suggested above, the characteristics of organizational culture and structure in Japan provides some background why the concern for leadership is still weak in the reform program of education.

However, it also shows some evidences of organizational flexibility to promote school improvement with both the sense of belonging as the staff member and cohesiveness to the organizational works. This structure is relatively responsible to the demands and necessity in the level of both individual organization and professional community. Even in case that low and limited leadership appears, organization as a whole is likely to be reactive to those situations.

We can inquire further into some advantages and disadvantages from the way of how we construct organizational structure of education in each country.

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