

Japan's educational reform: to restore the dignity of man

by Linda de Hoyos

In 1983, Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone commissioned a study for the reform of the Japanese educational system. As he revealed in an interview on Dec. 29, 1983, the prime minister's motivation was rooted in his determination for Japan's *Sengo no Sokessan*. "Following Japan's defeat in World War II," Nakasone explained, "the old Japanese culture was entirely denied—and rejected as being reactionary—under the MacArthur rule. A virtual vacuum state was thus created. Then, the 6-3-3 system was introduced to fill it up, and our people began talking about rights, freedom, and democracy. The new system found harmony with the Japanese culture in some respects and kept growing. Nevertheless, it caused a number of problems, including classroom violence. It has led to the devastation of education as we see it today. Therefore, I found it necessary to take another look at the problems from the viewpoint of spiritual culture. . . . I thought we should consider the matter of the national soil of spiritual culture and study the possibility of building a new education system on that soil."

In September 1984, Nakasone delivered a short address to the first meeting of the Provisional Council on Educational Reform, in which he noted that "educational reform involves more than the reform of education alone. It will inevitably lead to reform of Japanese society itself."

The Provisional Council, composed of Japan's leading educators, industrialists, writers, and government officials, has so far published two reports, the first on June 26, 1985, and the second on April 23 of this year.

It would be a foolish error on the part of Westerners to believe that Nakasone's charge implies a turning back of the clock and the denial of the educational reforms introduced by General MacArthur. The Council explains (1985) that the "first educational reform," which took place in the Meiji era, was intended to contribute to the development of the national state and modern industry." This reform led to the Fundamental Law of Education of 1872, upon which the Japanese school system ultimately rests. "The 'second educational reform' immediately after World War II identified such principles as the full development of personality, due regard for the dignity of the individual, and equal opportunity as basic guiding principles. . . . *The principle of putting emphasis on*

individuality is the main principle for the coming educational reform."

A point of crisis

Nevertheless, as the report points out and as any visitor to Japan will soon discover, in the last decade, Japan's educational system has reached a point of acute crisis. Education has been reified into a fierce competition among children and youth for grades and entrance into the best universities, which then provides the "ticket" for upward mobility into the industrial and government bureaucracies. As the first report notes, especially given the homogeneity of Japanese culture, prestige gained by education has taken on even greater social and financial weight. Among children and youth, however, this pressure has created what the second report calls "the desolation" of the educational system, "whose symptoms include bullying, school violence, and excessive competition in entrance exams. . . . The state of desolation in education implies desolation in children's minds."

The report sharply states: "The whole of adult society is responsible for the deep-rooted causes which have brought this about." The moral crisis of the society, the reports indicate, is caused by the failure of society to cope with problems raised by modern technological society—"the spread of materialistic ideas, the absence of feeling, an excessive emphasis on an empirical approach and on quantifiable values, a lack of reverence for the sublime, less contact with nature, and a lack of due regard for the dignity of life."

Japan is not the only modern industrialized nation that could raise fears concerning the desolation of the minds of its children. If, in Japan, the deterioration of the school system produces competition to the point of psychosis, in Western Europe and the United States, the deterioration of schools and the introduction of the rock-drug counterculture has caused a moral degeneration among youth leading to the nihilistic drug-crazed punk rocker on the street.

What is unique about Japan's view, is that the Council's two reports represent the first serious attempt by any group among the industrialized countries to redesign the educational system upon the premise that human scientific and technological development is vitally necessary and will advance.

The Council's reports are not documents of degenerate cultural pessimism—as with the “New Age” from American educators—but documents of cultural optimism. They point the way not only for the “reform of Japanese society,”

al reform required throughout the Western advanced sector.

Education for 80 years

The Council has rejected all inferences that education is a matter of pragmatic application of knowledge for the acquisition of skills required for career. Rather the Council upholds Friedrich Schiller's concept that education must nourish the full development of the individual both as a patriot of his nation and a citizen of the world. The second report states:

“As we consider education for the future, we should identify ‘invariables’ that transcend the changes of time. Outstanding traditions and the cultural heritage of Japan and all countries should be understood, protected, and passed down to future generations. . . . Recent developments in the process frequently referred to in Japan as ‘internationalization’ demand our active contribution, with a global perspective, to the peace and prosperity of mankind, as well as to the solution of diverse problems worldwide.

“The coming generation in Japan will be required to develop, more than ever in the past, a deep understanding of the international community in general, as well as a good sense of their own culture and abilities as Japanese. The new generation will also have to acquire sufficient language ability to communicate with members of other cultures, more cosmopolitan manners, and other relevant qualities necessary for global citizens. . . .

“To implement the present educational reform, we must be certain that the spirit of the Fundamental Law of Education is deeply rooted in the educational soil of Japan, and we must find ways creatively to nurture and develop this heritage as we move towards the 21st century. That Law defines ‘full development of personality’ as the ultimate aim of educational efforts, and indeed it is an important element in mankind's eternal pursuit of universal, ideal, transcendent human values. . . .

“The Council identifies the following goals for education, which it considers especially important for the 21st century and consistent with the spirit of the Fundamental Law of Education:

“A. The nurture of open and generous hearts and minds, strong bodies, and richly creative spirits

“B. The development of free and self-determining spirits and public-minded character

“C. The cultivation of Japanese competent to live as members of the world community.”

From this standpoint, the second report in particular stresses that the educational reform must encompass a “lifetime of learning.”

career, but for an 80-year career. Therefore, opportunities must be expanded for education outside of the school years—through community programs, on-the-job programs, graduate work, and research programs.

Specifically, the 1986 report notes that the deterioration of the home's role as “the starting point of a lifetime of learning” must be remedied. “Behind the various manifestations of the current ‘state of desolation’ in education, lies the serious fact that the home is not sufficiently achieving its educational potential.”

indictment:

“With the changing family life, there are a growing number of parents showing attitudes of over-protection, over-interference, or non-interference towards their children. Along with this trend, other factors—such as parents' confused policy on how to bring up their little children and parents' absence from home because of their employment—have led to a deterioration of the educational function of the family. Both the ties between the mother and her children and the influence of the father on his children have been weakened, and there is a lack of discipline at home.”

Within the elementary and secondary schools, the reports focus on the immediate upgrading of the nation's teaching staffs from the standpoint of the principles enunciated, a closer cooperation among school, community, and students, and the immediate reduction in class size to a maximum of 40 pupils.

For higher education, the reports call for a diversification of university training, with the university becoming a center of education for adults of all ages, and the expansion of technical institutes.

Most importantly, the Council attacks one of the basic weaknesses of Japan's drive for modernization—the lack of breakthroughs in the areas of basic scientific research. As the 1986 report emphasizes:

“With the interests of humankind in view, universities must endeavor to carry on traditions of scientific research while challenging the future with new areas and methods, and they must strive to meet the demands of the times while contributing to society, constantly working to improve the quality of their research. One of the most important future tasks for our nation is to promote basic sciences so as to bring them to a level worthy of international recognition.”

The Council's results so far, therefore, do not attempt to produce a “quick fix”

to establish the long-term principles that will hold for the transition to the 21st century. To complete its work, the Council states that it intends to “make an in-depth study of human civilization, focusing on science, technology and information. It will also study what universal values are meaningful for man.”

date of Prime Minister Nakasone to carry out not only the reform of education, “but the reform of Japanese society itself.”