

Educating People, Not Resources

Although his subject is Japanese education, Dr. Michio Nagai's concerns go well beyond Japan's shores. Rejecting the idea of education simply for human resource development, he advocates a broader international concern with the human condition. Specifically in education, this must include diverse recognition of each individual's intrinsic worth. High technology, he argues, is important not in its own right but only as it is used to enhance human living. An educator by background, Dr. Nagai was Minister of Education from December 1974 through December 1976 and is currently with the United Nations University in Tokyo.

His interviewer, Dr. Benjamin Duke, is professor of comparative and international education at International Christian University and the author of *Japan's Militant Teachers* (1973) and the soon-to-be-published *The Japanese School: a Challenge to Industrial America*.



Michio Nagai

Question: *Many developments have taken place in Japanese education since you were Minister of Education. One of the most important ones is that Japanese education has become a center of controversy and the Prime Minister is about to appoint a blue-ribbon panel to plan "sweeping reforms." What is behind this?*

NAGAI: Educational reform is a central issue in Japan, as it is all over the world. Several issues must be discussed in Japan. Number one is the structure of Japanese education. Primary and junior high school education is strong, but senior high school and higher education has been very poorly designed. There must be a reevaluation, including reassessment of the examination system. It is rather ridiculous that Todai (Tokyo University) is still regarded as so important.

Second is our teacher training. Teachers are poorly trained. Too many students have the credentials without the ability. They have very little training of any kind.

Next is something which the government should not interfere with—family education. All indications are that the family is weakening. There are rising divorce rates, increasing juvenile delinquency, and so forth. This is a private area outside the realm of laws and ordinances, but there has to be more discussion about the patterns of life in our changing society.

And finally there is life-long education. People are living longer. All these factors must be considered in the current controversy.

Q: *Would you attribute the problem of violence in the schools particularly to the situation in the family?*

NAGAI: There are two elements. One is the breakdown of the family. Japanese used to be very self-restrained. We were not necessarily Confucian, but we had a modified Confucianism. Now self-restraint has become weaker. The tendency is to me-ism, and this is one element.

Another element is excessive competition. Examinations sometimes have an overemphasis on memorization with rather petty and meaningless questions.

To give you one example, Japan is probably one of the most prolific countries in translating from English. But people have great difficulty conversing in English. When I was introducing the Unified Entrance Examination, I said there should be some oral English questions. But everyone else rejected this, so the top scorer on the Unified Entrance Examination is not necessarily the person who is best at English.

Q: *What do you think about the Unified Entrance Examination now?*

NAGAI: This policy was instituted upon the request of the National Association of University Presidents, mainly the presidents of the national universities. The Ministry of Education was only supposed to administer the Unified Entrance Examination, which is somewhat similar to the United States college boards or Britain's General Certificate of Education exams.

Once the general scores are known, then each university can give its own individualized test, including essay questions, interviews, piano tests if it is a music school, and so on.

Because of the principle of university autonomy, we asked the university presidents to get their faculties'

endorsements. The faculty meetings said yes, and so did the university councils. On paper, the idea was that there would be two types of examinations: the general and the specific, with actual admission based upon a comprehensive evaluation of both. That was fine, and that is the way the whole thing started.

But most universities now rely too heavily on the Unified Entrance Examination. This runs counter to the original agreement and violates the principle of self-government. They have forfeited their autonomy. It does not need to be that way. Some private universities in Japan—such as ICU, Keio, Sophia, and Kansei Gakuin—are doing innovative things because of fairly interesting and strong leadership; but they are the exceptions.

Q: *Educators from other countries, especially America, are actually envious of many aspects of Japanese education. The Japanese school produces highly literate students with a strong mathematics competence. Your students study diligently. Your disciplinary problems seem minor in comparison to many American big city schools. Is it wise to change such a school system?*

NAGAI: Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* and Ezra Vogel's *Japan As Number One* are like pictures of a small island seen from another planet through a telescope. The pictures were well drawn. But when you live on that island, the inhabitants there look at it in a totally different way. It is not that Benedict or Vogel are wrong. It's simply a totally different way of looking at the same thing. We Japanese look at our institutions more critically than others do.

Japan is a mass democracy, and mass democracies are very difficult to manage, not only in North America but everywhere. There is the nuclear family, the abundance of material goods, and increased care and services by the government. Individual initiative is weakening. Still, mass democracy is new to Japan. The Japanese first became aware of themselves as a mass democracy in the mid-1970s. We are not yet as spoiled by the weaknesses of mass democracies. In addition, Confucianism, our counterpart to the American New England tradition, is still working in Japan. Crime, safety, drugs, etc. are still relatively under control. However, if you live in Japan, you begin to see the changes and the beginning of the breakdown in some of our traditions.

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Q: *What do you suggest?*

NAGAI: Japanese education has many weaknesses. One of the things that I am most concerned about, as I said, is the structure of high school and university

education. There are quite a few universities that are substandard. This is partly because the rapid economic growth convinced some people that it was a chance to go into "the education business." This is a new concept since the 1960s. Education is so important that Japan never saw it as a "business" before. But these people came in with their talk of "human resource development" and made a lot of money. This has to be reformed.

Examinations are another issue. There is an excessive uniformity. There has to be more diversity, and the examinations should be designed to promote diversity once basic proficiencies have been achieved.

Q: *Do you think diversity will be an important issue in educational reform? I know it is one that Prime Minister Nakasone talks about a lot.*

NAGAI: Yes, and I think it can be achieved. Look at business. Before the war, we had only a handful of top-rank companies. These were companies like Mitsubishi, Mitsui, and Sumitomo. Now there are fifty or sixty companies that are just as big and just as good. These are companies like Sony, Toyota, and Nissan. Nobody at these new companies—these Sonies—feels in any way inferior to the Mitsubishis.

Society has diversified. Elementary and junior high school education has also diversified. There are so many schools, and all of these schools are of a high quality. In fact, the level of education at the compulsory education level is about the same as I received in our prewar elite schools.

So we have a big educational base and a broad roof of prosperous companies. But in between is a remnant of the old system: *Todai*. Yukichi Fukuzawa foretold this many years ago when he predicted that the *fief-run* schools with their outstanding scholars would be the last to change as Japan modernized.

The Japanese economy has undergone major changes. So have our compulsory-level schools. So has most of society. But the upper levels of our educational system are still stuck in the *Todai*-centered past. *Todai's*



Jubilant students learn they have just passed a university entrance exam.

Photo: Asahi Shimbun

influence on Japanese higher education will have to decline someday.

There are two ways of looking at yourself. One is to say, "I am Japanese." That way tends to human resources. Yukichi Fukuzawa was a great man. But as great as he was, he was always talking about the education of Japanese. He never thought about the education of human beings. That was understandable in light of the need for Japan to catch up with the West to survive as a nation, but other nineteenth-century thinkers talked about human beings. They had the right idea. You can also say, "I am a man," or "I am a woman." That can be free of Japan. I can be working together with other peoples and not have to be conscious of being Japanese. We are all human beings.

Something went wrong in the twentieth century. Human beings have turned out to be human resources in all the major countries, including the United States, the Soviet Union, and Japan. We need to think of people as human beings. Here at the United Nations University, we have people from many nations, and it does not make sense for me to be thinking of myself as Japanese all the time. I am a human being, and the other people who work here are also human beings.

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Q: *What would you do to the school system to orient it away from human resources and toward human beings?*

NAGAI: That is very difficult, but there are many changes to be made in Japan.

The first thing Japan should be paying attention to is the Koreans in Japan. There are about a million Koreans living in Japan. Recognition of their status and problems is an important step toward rooting out the imperialist mentality in Japan. It is important to get rid of the imperialist mentality everywhere, and I think history shows that progress can be made. For example, there were only two independent countries in Asia in 1945: Thailand and Japan. Every other country was a colony, either of Japan or one of the Western countries. Now, only forty years later, there are many more independent countries. This is very encouraging.

Yet the legacy of the great powers still hangs over Asia. Not even all of the independent countries are truly independent. A group of truly independent countries could be an important counterweight to the two superpowers—the United States with its problems in Latin America and the Soviet Union with its many domestic problems.

There are all sorts of things that have to be done to promote the internationalization of Japanese education. For example, there has to be more diversity in language education. When I was Minister of Education, I got a law passed providing extra government subsidies to universities that taught Asian languages. At the time, there was only one national university teaching Korean. Now there are three. In the private sector, there were only two universities teaching Korean. Now there are more than ten.

There are many more things that can and should be done. It is not impossible to internationalize Japan. I know that Japan is an island country with a somewhat homogeneous culture, but ways can be found to internationalize once we decide that is what we want to do.

Q: *Japan, the United States, and other nations are engaged in a heated competition for high technology. How do you see the strengths and weaknesses of the Japanese school system in this high-tech race?*

NAGAI: One asset that Japan has is that it experienced the bombing of Hiroshima on August 6 and Nagasaki on August 9, 1945. These nuclear bombs were high-tech products, and this experience has made us very sensitive to the question of ethics in relation to science and technology. At the same time, the question is more than ethics.

When pollution became a problem, the Japanese government moved very quickly and established the Environment Agency in 1972. Japan was one of the first countries in the world to effect a structural response to the danger of pollution.

High technology is a limitless thing. It is bound to grow in electronics, biotechnology, and other fields. However, we must not let it endanger our survival. Japan has a head start on the institutional approach, including the private sector.

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What about specific technologies? I do not think Japan can compete with the United States, in space science, in telecommunications satellites, or, fortunately, in the militarization of space.

In electronics and biotechnology, Japanese private companies are spending about 4% of GNP for research and education. Most of Japan's research money comes from the private sector, and I think this gives Japan an edge in private-sector development.

Rather than just talking about high technology, we need to think about high technology as it relates to human beings and human survival. More crucial than the competition in high technology is the question of

high technology combined with what. This is basic. I am really scared by the international situation today.

High technology sounds wonderful. But we must always remember that the Soviet Union is determined to stand equal with the United States. If the United States moves in the wrong direction, so does the Soviet response. A vicious circle can be built up between the two. We have to have a new approach in this post-Hiroshima era.

Q: *Relations between Nikkyoso (the teachers' union) and the Ministry of Education were another of your major concerns as Minister of Education. Do you think this relationship has improved?*

NAGAI: Overall, yes. This is partly because Japan has become less class-conscious. Studies have shown that about 90% of the Japanese people identify themselves as middle class. The idea of class struggle no longer has much appeal.

Another important factor is that people are beginning to focus on different concerns. If you want to make the comparison with international politics, *Nikkyoso* is like the Soviet Union and the Ministry of Education and the LDP (Liberal Democratic Party) are like the United States. People are becoming more and more aware of the fact that this conflict between *Nikkyoso* and the LDP—between the Soviet Union and the United States—threatens to annihilate all of us. That makes us think that there may be other issues which are more important than the ones these two are fighting about.

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Q: *Looking back on your experience as Minister of Education and now as Rector at the United Nations University, are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future of Japan and Japanese education?*

NAGAI: When I was asked that same question on NHK television recently, I said that I am optimistic. The interviewer said, “Don't you have to qualify that?” I said that I take a determined optimism. A pessimistic attitude could lead to disaster. I cannot talk about optimism without determination. Even though there are signs of deterioration in the world, I am still optimistic, not only for Japan but for mankind in general.

There have been problems. The Jeffersonian dream of grassroots democracy and small government has not come to pass any more than the Soviet Union's political dreams of a stateless society founded upon the solidarity of the working class. At the same time, the Club of Rome's 1972 *The Limits to Growth* has shown that our physical frontiers are gone and our mineral resources finite.

However, I remain optimistic. Even though there may be limits outside us, the human possibilities—the inner resources—are limitless. In spite of all of our difficulties, I remain a determined optimist. ●