Chapter 17
Meritocracy, Modernity, and the Completion of Catch-Up: Problems and Paradoxes

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Abstract Japan is among just a few non-western countries to have experienced both "catch-up" (with the west) and what might be called a "post-catch-up modernization." Undergoing these two stages of distinct social transformation, Japanese society has encountered difficulties in making a smooth transition from catch-up to post-catch-up modernity. This is particularly clear in the field of education. In this chapter, I place these Japanese experiences in a global context and discuss what implications they have for sociological research on education as well as what theoretical contributions such a lens can contribute to recent debates on modernity across the social sciences. I argue that the Japanese mind-set built up over the catch-up modernization period later greatly impacted the ways problems were socially constructed in education during the transition to the post-catch-up stage. It unexpectedly produced paradoxical results of successful catch-up modernization: an unintentional slide into failure in the envisaged transition toward post-catch-up modernity. Through analyzing these experiences, this chapter will explicate and theorize a mechanism in which how misrecognition and misguidance are generated within the transition from catch-up to post-catch-up modernity.

17.1 Introduction

Japan is among just a few non-western countries to have experienced both "catch-up" (with the west) and what might be called a "post-catch-up modernization."[1] Undergoing these two stages of distinct social transformation, Japanese society has encountered difficulties in making a smooth transition from catch-up to

[1] As detailed below, the phrase "catch-up" or "catch-up modernization" is used in government official documents, while "post-catch-up" and "post-catch-up modernity" are analytical concepts coined by the author of this chapter.

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post-catch-up modernity. This is particularly clear in the field of education. In this final chapter, I place these Japanese experiences in a global context and discuss what implications they have for sociological research on education as well as what theoretical contributions such a lens can contribute to recent debates on modernity across the social sciences.

As detailed below, the Japanese mind-set, or *zeitgeist*, that was built up over the catch-up modernization period (1868–late 1970s) later greatly impacted the ways problems were socially constructed in education during the transition to the post-catch-up stage (1980s–present). Solutions to these problems, which are guided foremost by the way the problems were first constructed, produced unintended results. Among these unintended results was the expansion of educational inequality. This occurred because the problems were misrecognized, usually in the form of either overestimation or undervaluation, and therefore the solutions also became misguided: responding primarily to how problems were constructed at the transitional phase to post-catch-up modernity. In this respect, the Japanese experiences provide a rich example of the paradoxical results of successful catch-up modernization: an unintentional slide into failure in the envisaged transition toward post-catch-up modernity. Through analyzing these experiences, we can explicate and theorize a mechanism in which how misrecognition and misguidance are generated within the transition from catch-up to post-catch-up modernity. A theory of paradoxical failure embedded in catch-up and post-catch-up modernity will, I argue, give us a cogent theoretical framework through which we understand more articulately how and why policies for reforming education that were launched and developed at the end of the catch-up period likely result in failing, perhaps even in producing, various unintended consequences, particularly the expansion of inequality in education. This has contributed greatly, I argue, to educational crisis in this highly modernized society.

To explicate this argument, in this chapter, I focus on *meritocracy*, an old yet still important subject in educational sociology, specifically in the Japanese scholarship. Meritocracy as a sociological concept was coined by Michael Young (1958) over a half century ago. Despite his original pessimism, the word meritocracy, specifically after its "Americanization," has become used as a key concept to capture the nature of modernity in education and society. Under meritocracy, modernizing societies strive to depart from pre-modern society, one where not merit but origins of individuals determine their social positions. Such a rosier interpretation makes meritocracy become an integral principle (or ideology) embodied and embedded in "modern" education. In other words, to modernize a society, meritocracy is mandated and transformed into a core organizing principle of modern educational systems, one seen to contribute to nurturing productive human resources (human capital), selecting and allocating people into appropriate social positions according to their talents and merits (achieved status), and providing wider opportunities for education to the populace (equality of opportunity). All of those features were believed to be essential components for modernizing a society. Regardless of whether or not it could be achieved in reality, this was the driving ideal.

Hence, tracing the evolutions of meritocracy, both in its contemporary positive and original negative sense, helps us to become aware of our reflections of modernity

and modern education in a society. Through the rise and the fall of meritocracy, which articulates paradoxical relations between success in catch-up modernization and failure in post-catch-up modernity, we can observe how a society reflects itself in the process of building and modifying its modern education. This becomes one aspect of the reflexivity in and on modernity, which one may call "reflexive modernity" (Beck et al. 1995).[2] Reflexive modernity, nonetheless, may sometimes produce paradoxical results due to the distorted reflection on the particular articulation of "first modernity" (Beck and Grande 2010) itself. The distortion may result in misguided reforms striving to solve problems and even in unintended consequences such as expanding inequality, which is partly internally generated (e.g., promoting individualization intentionally in education) and partly intensified by the external pressures under globalization (e.g., enforced individualization under neoliberal economic and welfare reforms).

In this respect, the Japanese experience is outstanding as a case of reflexive modernity in education. What role has meritocratic education played in the process of catch-up modernization? What *new* roles are expected to exert in the post-catch-up modernity? What problems in meritocratic education are identified and socially constructed over the transitional process from catch-up to post-catch-up phases? What impacts have the transition had on the ways of those problems were constructed? By addressing these questions, I will discuss what theoretical and policy implications that Japanese experiences can deliver for larger global and theoretical concerns.

17.2 Meritocracy Revisited

Why does meritocracy still matter? There are three advantages in tracing the evolutions of meritocracy in Japan. Firstly, the evolutions of meritocracy reflect and therefore can depict how a "modern" national education system has been established and what problems have emerged in the process of modernization of society and education. Japan is a typical case of a "late" modernizing country, one which intended to design and establish a meritocratic education system rapidly, extensively, explicitly, and even excessively. Hence, the analysis of evolutions of meritocracy in Japan enables us to examine how and what problems in education are

[2] Beck and Grande (2010) distinguish the first and the second modernity. According to them, the "premises of First Modernity societies" include "the nation-state, a programmatic individualization bounded by collective structures and identities, gainful work and employment, a conception of nature founded on its exploitation, a concept of scientifically defined rationality, and the principle of functional differentiation," while as "the basic social institutions of the First Modernity have become ineffective or dysfunctional for both society and individuals," the second or reflexive modernity arises, which enhances reflexivity in and on modernity (Beck and Grande 2010, p. 415). Our discussions regarding catch-up and post-catch-up modernity overlaps to some extent their conceptualization of two kinds of modernity, but we pay more attentions to the transition between the two more clearly by giving different concepts.

embedded in the process of modernizing education more clearly than is the case in western nations. The reason is that western countries have developed meritocratic education more slowly, restrictedly, and implicitly, as in the British case.

Secondly, plenty of problems in education are discussed surrounding and concerning the issues of meritocratic education in Japan. Among these are inequalities in education such as those between social classes, gender, and ethnicities, as well as student and youth problems such as bullying, delinquencies, and refusal to attend school. Reading the chapters in the current edited volume, readers must recognize that Japan's education has ample problems, as discussed in each chapter of this volume. I will partially show in this chapter how the evolutions of meritocracy, specifically those identified in the transition period from the catch-up to the post-catch-up modernization are related to all those current, purported problems in Japan's education.

Thirdly, since evolutions of meritocracy reflect to some extent path dependency of education policies in the past, we can distinguish similarities and differences in the problems encountered in Japanese education as compared with other societies. Despite the nature of meritocracy as a modern universalistic ideology, the specific evolutions of meritocracy formed in "meritocratic" education differ among societies, in its structure, pace of development, and outcomes. Those differences reflect distinctive path dependencies developed within specific contexts, specificities emerging within their own path to modernity. Meritocracy, as a solid ideology of modernity and modernization, has played a central role in establishing modern education in numerous countries. Discussing the Japanese case, however, helps us examine more closely how path dependency in modernization affects the evolutions of meritocracy. Furthermore, the Japanese experiences depict what problems in education are produced and conceived over the course of the rise and the fall of meritocracy, providing a good showcase of the complexities and paradoxes of reflexive modernity.

17.3 Establishing National Meritocracy and Paradoxes Embedded in the Process

A brief history of modern education in Japan reveals how a national meritocracy was established, one that sets a cogent basis of our discussion. Ikuo Amano, a prominent historical sociologist of education in Japan, discovers convincingly that meritocratic education was established in Japan much earlier than in European advanced nations in the early twentieth century (Amano 2011). He points out that Japanese business corporations were ahead of their counterparts in Europe in appreciating the values of educational degrees and diplomas for efficiently recruiting new employees, i.e., this selection was not limited to public bureaucracies for high rank officials. Amano, worth quoting at length, states:

> After its birth in late-eighteenth century Germany, credentialism spread to many other European countries during the nineteenth century. In Europe, however, credentialism was limited to professional occupations and government offices and bureaucracies, and did not spread to business corporations as the supporters of industrialisation and the central organisation in industrial society. One reason for this seems to be that the European legitimate school systems were unrelated to the training of human resources needed in the world of business. Another reason seems to be the delay in the bureaucratisation of their organisation. In any case, the development of industrialisation did not directly bring about the development of credentialism.
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> By contrast, Japanese credentialism was introduced in the business world in the early stages of industrialisation, or before the full-scale bureaucratisation of their organizations began, and spread to the entire society with the development and bureaucratisation of companies. Among the organizations and occupations constituting the modern sector, companies and their human resources intrinsically have the greatest growth potential. (Amano 2011, p. 135)

This discovery of earlier and more extensive development in Japan's meritocracy (named "credentialism") may not be all that surprising for readers familiar with Roland Dore's arguments about "the late development effect" on "diploma disease" (Dore 1997). Dore posits:

> Other things are equal, the later development starts (i.e. the later the point in world history that a country starts on a modernization drive): the more widely education certificates are used for occupational selection; the faster the rate of qualification inflation; and the more examination-oriented schooling becomes at the expense of genuine education. (Dore 1997, p. 72)

While Dore does not detail the evolutions of Japanese meritocracy, the first symptom of the diploma disease undeniably speaks to the Japanese meritocracy, while the last one, known as "exam hells," also fits the Japanese case quite well. Dore argued the reason why late-developed countries experience those symptoms:

> Part of it is the late developers' need to *catch-up* fast—by improving knowledge and skills in formal education packages. The most important part is the general tendency of the later developer to import the latest technology from the metropolitan models—social as well as machine technology. (Dore 1997, p. 72; emphasis added)

As Amano's research confirms, Japan as late developer in catching-up pursued the western advanced nations by importing and borrowing advanced knowledge and technology.[3] Japanese modernizers, however, had to face many intractable difficulties to do this. But foremost among these was the language barrier. Note that Japanese is one of the most different and therefore one of the most difficult languages to learn of most of western languages including English and vice versa.[4] The way of overcoming the language barrier, according to Amano, contributed greatly to

[3] See the chapter by Rappleye in this volume about importing and borrowing advanced knowledge and technology from advanced western countries.

[4] The Foreign Service Institute (FSI) of the US Department of State places Japanese as among foreign languages which are "typically somewhat more difficult for native English speakers to learn than other languages" (http://web.archive.org/web/20071014005901/http://www.nvtc.gov/lotw/months/november/learningExpectations.html)

the hierarchical structure of Japanese education, thus helping to shape the highly competitive nature of educational meritocracy in Japan from the beginning, one which would later produce paradoxical consequences for the meritocracy.

Learning western languages was necessitated in importing advanced western knowledge and technology. To attain this goal, language education was prioritized at the higher levels of formal, modern education. To achieve the transmission of knowledge, the Meiji government implemented two policies: employing foreign instructors and professors with paying high salaries and sending the best and brightest students to study abroad to western countries. Both policies entailed enormous costs for the government, at a time when the national budget was already strained and the Japanese currency was of very low value internationally. Both in the path of learning under foreign professors in European languages in Japan and through studying abroad, a very high command of western languages was required, while the number of students who could access such high-level language education was naturally limited. To screen the best and brightest boys (females were excluded entirely) to reach that high level, the Japanese education system was constructed in the form of a sharp hierarchical structure (Amano 2011). It had the only one national higher education institution (Tokyo University first, then renamed the Imperial University later, and then renamed again to Tokyo Imperial University after the government established more Imperial Universities) at the top, where foreign professors taught advanced western knowledge in their own languages. Below the university, elitist state preparatory schools (later called higher schools or *Kōtō Gakkō* in Japanese) taught mostly western languages and screened and fed best and brightest students into the university. To enter those elitist state preparatory schools, students were required to pass sever entrance examinations. Since a visible hierarchical structure among those preparatory schools was created according to the results of entrance examinations, the academically best students strived to enter the top preparatory school, which was later called the First Higher School to distinguish from other higher schools. Likewise, in a somewhat later period, boys' middle schools, feeding academic institutions to higher schools also, were established, further solidifying a clear hierarchical structure among students in each prefecture. Within this system, ranking positions were determined primarily by students' test scores, i.e., scores needed to successfully gain admission.

In this way, a dual hierarchical structure of Japanese education, one between different levels of education from elementary to university education and the other among schools, colleges, and universities at the same level of education, thus came to be established. Since then, the structure has intensified competitions among students in seeking for higher test scores at entrance examinations to enter higher-rank positioned schools. The structure of Japanese education as such contributed to the rise of meritocracy by engaging and motivating many ambitious and aspired young Japanese to work hard in schools to learn advanced knowledge. This appeal was strong regardless of their social origins (Amano 2011). The self-intensifying competitions, however, undermined the legitimacy of meritocracy in the later period. The success of meritocracy contributed to it falling to crisis and even to exposing

the failure of meritocratic education. Such paradoxical results of the dual hierarchical structure of education will be discussed in detail later.

The language barrier produced another feature of Japanese educational meritocracy. Japan was among the "latecomers" to modernization, but its trajectory of the development of meritocracy in Japan was distinctively different from the other latecomers like Sri Lanka and Kenya, as analyzed by Dore (1997). The latter two cases, among others, were former British colonies, where education for elite during the colonial period was done in English, not in their vernacular languages. Therefore, former colonialized countries are more likely to reserve parts of elite education in the language of former colonizers, even after their independence. In many cases, these places relied heavily on studying abroad in the former colonizing countries to nurture the knowledge and dispositions deemed essential for elites – a holdover from colonial times.

In this sense, we can see that the use of vernacular language is of great importance in the construction of a *national* meritocratic education system. Where vernacular languages become the media of instruction in schooling, including higher level, the transition from compulsory to secondary and to higher education can be done more smoothly. According to Amano, in this respect, changing the media of instruction in higher education from western languages to Japanese proceeded rapidly in Japan. Only about 20 years after establishing modern higher education institutions, students were able to learn most subjects in Japanese. Considering that Japanese is one of the most different languages from western languages (including English), this is an astonishing feat of localizing western advanced knowledge and of transmitting the imported knowledge to the wider Japanese populace.

Building the meritocratic education based on their vernacular language made it possible for Japanese education to develop much rapidly and smoothly by providing more educational opportunities to people. The postwar education reforms, influenced by the American occupation, only accelerated this because the American-born ideology of equal opportunity of education and the more simplified school system encouraged greater numbers of Japanese to obtain more education at the higher levels. This resulted in further intensifying meritocratic competition, particularly at the selection points of entrance examinations to senior high schools and universities, by increasing the number of participants to the competitions. All these competitions, from the bottom to the highest rung of schooling system through to the abovementioned dual structure of hierarchy, were and still are conducted in the use of Japanese language. As a result, learning foreign languages, except for foreign language examinations with limited contents in exam questions, gradually lost its appeal. Such a "regression," unlike in former colonized countries, came to be problematized explicitly and deliberately after Japan encountered the necessity to "globalize" its education, i.e., enhancing proficiency in English as a lingua franca. But, this result is ironically and obviously a by-product of earlier success in localizing advanced knowledge into Japanese language, which helped establish a once successful national meritocracy built on its vernacular language. In this way, practically useful English education was *sacrificed* under national meritocracy, which prioritized the Japanese language to establish the modern education system.

The localization of advanced western knowledge did proceed not only on the side of language use as the media of instruction in schooling but also as nationalization in other aspects advanced. To avoid the societal influences of the western values and ideology such as individualism, freedom, and republican idealism, which were viewed as compromising Japanese values and traditions, nationalization of education both in contents and pedagogy was deemed inevitable for the prewar government (Duke 2009).

In so doing, the very centralized national education system was designed and established aiming to exert central control over the contents and pedagogies in school by setting, for example, national guidelines of curricula and nationally edited school textbooks, and establishing national normal schools to train and certify teachers. To manage the centrally controlled education, local educational administrations were also watched close by the central government through the deployment of high rank administrators to localities and their flagship schools from Tokyo. Thus, a uniform education system was established.[5]

This uniform education, both in teaching practices and administrations, significantly and substantially contributed to the successful launch of a national meritocratic education system by advancing standardization of education under the restricted resources in the prewar Japan. Furthermore, the legacy of uniform education it produced has generally remained up until the late 1980s despite substantial restructuring of the education system through the postwar reforms. This is partly because the postwar attempt to decentralize did not work. However, there is also convincing evidence to suggest that the uniform education was deemed an efficient system even for the postwar government who suffered from severe financial and other resource restrictions due to the devastations during the war time (Kariya 2009, 2013b). Therefore, to reestablish the new school systems under the limited resources, the uniform education had been preserved until the end of catch-up modernization. In this regard, uniform education succeeded in reestablishing national meritocracy in the postwar period much more inclusively and extensively than in the prewar elitist system by extending more education opportunities in more standardized and equal financing and resourcing to education. Despite its feat, it has become ironically judged an obstacle preventing promoting diversity and flexibility in education and advancing global adaptation of Japan's education over the post-catch-up modernity. This is another paradox of Japanese education in "catch-up" modernization.

17.4 Excessive Competition and Criticism of Meritocracy

Postwar education reforms, influenced by US idealism on education as led by the American New Dealers in charge at the time, introduced the principle of equality of educational opportunity to Japan. The reforms simplified the schooling system

[5] Despite the strong central control over local education administrations, in terms of finance of education, localities were burdened heavily. See Kariya (2009).

through abolishing the misogynist and elitist university and higher school systems. The postwar government accredited more colleges and universities for both male and female students and introduced co-ed junior high schools as the last 3 years of compulsory education. Furthermore, between these, more accessible and mostly co-ed new senior high schools were rebuilt. These, nonetheless, kept in place a hierarchical structure among schools based on the results of entrance examinations. Both the egalitarian ideology and the more accessible school system had accelerated meritocratic competitions among students. This coincided with the arrival of the baby boomers in the 1960s. The number of applicants to senior high schools and universities drastically increased in the 1960s and 1970s, as Japan's economy rapidly recovered from the war and moved into a period of sustained high growth.

The enrolment rate to senior high school skyrocketed during the two decades of the 1960s and the 1970s. By the end of 1970s, it had reached over 90% out of all junior high school graduates. Likewise, the enrolment rate to higher education has increased under the new university and college system: 10.1% in 1955 to 38.4% in 1975 and then 56.8% in 2016. A "mass education society" (Kariya 1995) thus grew up rapidly in the wake of WWII.

The mass education society arose in tandem with a "mass meritocracy" (Kariya 1995; Nakamura 2011). Almost all the populace underwent meritocratic competitions at a certain stage of their life. The rapid growth and wider provision of senior high school education is indicative of the establishment of mass meritocracy, in which more educational opportunities were offered more equally. It also signified that almost all young Japanese had undergone meritocratic selection through entrance examinations to sort themselves into different ranked high schools by their test scores in the visible hierarchy of the upper secondary education. Competition was perhaps an inevitable by-product of this and was reported to be heating up almost to the point of burning students, as detailed by both the media and progressive education scholars in the 1960s and the 1970s as the boomers reached college age. Critics pointed out that these overwhelming meritocratic competitions gave rise to educational problems among children and youth such as deviant behaviors, bullying in school, school-phobia (later given a more neutral name as "school nonattendance"), and an increase in participating in private tutoring ("shadow education").[6]

The most prominent criticism against national meritocratic education appeared in the mid-1970s from a group of eminent educational scholars commissioned by the Japan Teachers' Union. Their report entitled "Committee for Reflecting the Japan's Education System" stated:

> Children are classified according to 'achievement', ranked from top to bottom based on their 'ability', divided into kids who continue to the next higher level and those who won't, sorted further into general and vocational high schools, and discriminated by gender. In addition to that, they are separated and selected by attending either a top-rank or a lower-tier school. Thus, a fierce and unfeeling focus on competition is born. This strengthens the trend toward a diploma society in our country, while schools are becoming scenes of hell in a struggle for educational credentials. This tendency in education can be termed 'meritocracy.' (Kyōiku seido kentō iinkai 1974: 54)

[6] Regarding those problems in education, see Chaps. 7 and 9 in this volume.

> Meritocracy (nōryokushugi) is the chief culprit behind the decay of today's education. It is the root of all educational evils. (Ibid. 1974: 82)

Such critical voices echoed extensively across Japan during the later stage of Japan's catch-up period. The exception was, at that time, the government. Both education scholars and the mass media frequently condemned harsh competitions through Japanese meritocratic education as the "evil," one that allegedly had given rise to most of the contemporary problems in education: school violence, school-phobia, rote memorization learning, ignoring students' individuality, and thus ruining students' creativity and autonomy. These maladies were looked upon as symptoms or *sacrifices* required due to the prioritized development of efficient (costless) meritocratic education. The establishment of meritocratic education, which was once regarded as great success over the catch-up modernization, thus, had gradually become considered as obstacles preventing the development of "genuine" education, i.e., it required the *sacrifice* of something important.

The criticisms of meritocratic education also blamed it for depreciating the value of knowledge transmitted through its exam-driven education. The knowledge transferred through meritocratic education was once deemed highly valuable, as only elites accessed the knowledge imported and translated from western advanced countries. The usefulness and legitimacy of knowledge learned and examined through meritocratic education had never been doubted at the earliest stages. However, once meritocracy was extended to cover most people in the society thanks to universally accessible educational opportunities, the value and usefulness of knowledge learned by rote for examinations in meritocratic education became obscure for many, although it was still recognized as unambiguously usefulness for entrance examinations. Knowledge learned in school depreciated in value as the scholastic meritocracy became more successful in covering more young Japanese. Job placements of high school and university graduates were greatly influenced by the rank positions of their graduating schools and universities (Kariya 2011; Ishida 1993; Rosenbaum and Kariya 1989). The rank positions were in turn determined by their exam scores in general subjects. Consequently, the relations between knowledge and vocation become progressively less visible and more vaguely connected for the majority of non-elite students who learned mostly general not vocational subjects in schools up to the end of senior high school. This is significant because most Japanese were now completing high school, whereas most subjects are in general education. Exceptions are the limited numbers of those who can obtain and attain professional and elitist professions from top-rank universities. Put differently, outcomes of meritocratic education were no longer being regarded or rewarded as "merits" for the majority who underwent exam-driven education equipped with little vocational skills. Thus, the past successful accomplishment of meritocratic education led to its reversal, leading to crisis in its legitimacy. This is another paradox of meritocracy in Japan.

A decade later, the Japanese government finally joined the growing chorus of criticisms against the meritocratic nature of Japan's education. The most politically influential education council, the Ad Hoc Council on Education Reforms (AHCER),

was the first government body officially pointing out the problems of Japanese meritocratic education. Its fourth report stated, "it is undeniable that Japan's traditional education has mostly rested upon the tendency of cramming knowledge by rote memorization" (AHCER 1988, p. 278). Furthermore, the AHCER recognized and identified such problems in Japanese education as "uniform education system," "deteriorating children's spirits," harmful influences from "diploma society" on education and youth, and so on. It should be noted that in identifying those educational problems, the AHCER explicitly referred to this back to their conception of catch-up modernization. The first report states:

> We need to recognize that the 'negative side-effects' of Japan's modern-industrial-civilization, its 'catch-up model' of modernization, and/or the rapid economic growth in the postwar period, led to the deterioration of children's spirits, built a society upon foundations that damaged the physical and mental health conditions of human beings, tainted interactions among people, and had negative influences on culture and education. (AHCER 1988, 50)

Furthermore, the report attributed the rise of uniform education both in teaching at classroom level and educational administrations at the nation level to the past success in importing advanced western knowledge by saying:

> We imported and adopted from Western advanced industrial countries such things as their advanced technology and systems, and we emphasized efficiency to promote swiftly their dissemination. From a broader perspective, in terms of both content and method, a rigidly uniform education system was inevitably established. (AHCER 1988, 9)

Here, other educational problems such as "the tendency of cramming knowledge by rote memorization" and "failure in nurturing students' creativity and individuality" were attributed to the catch-up model of education, one which primarily sought efficiency in importing and adopting advanced knowledge from western, advanced countries. This official recognition or construction of the problems in catch-up stage of education evidences the views of the government that the "rigidly uniform education" as well as learning through "cramming knowledge by rote memorization" have brought a once successful meritocratic Japanese education in the past into crisis in its functions and legitimacy. They argued that education producing those problems as *sacrifices* of efficient meritocracy was no longer alleged appropriate to the post-catch-up era.

It is important to point out that right after the government recognized that Japan's catch-up had been completed in the late 1970s or early 1980s, they began arguing publically that meritocratic education in the catch-up period had become problematic. This fact suggests that the government reluctantly had to accept the Japanese meritocratic education as a "necessary evil" during the catch-up period, i.e., they believed that meritocratic education could have helped Japan catch up with the west effectively and efficiently. The success of meritocracy was thus seen to be falling into failure concomitant with the end of catch-up modernity. But ironically, again, it must be remembered that the end of catch-up had been attained by the very rise of meritocracy itself.

17.5 Solutions to the Paradoxes and Their Unintended Results

The perceived problems and obstacles that meritocratic education supposedly produced led policymakers to pursue specific policy solutions at the end of catch-up modernization. Scrutinizing the logic and rationale behind policies aiming to solve those problems and obstacles, we can reveal a shift in how Japan's national meritocracy was being perceived. In this section, I choose two problems: mitigation of competitions and reforms for cramming knowledge learning.

17.5.1 Policies for Mitigating Educational Competitions

From the mid-1990s onward, the government has strived to mitigate sever academic competitions in the national meritocracy. The system was alleged to have produced exam-driven education and its related problems in education as *sacrifices*, as discussed earlier. Targeting entrance examinations to enter senior high school and university, the government thus introduced multidimensional assessments of applicants as a substitute for one-dimensional exam score style admissions.

In 1997, the Ministry of Education (MEXT) proposed several reforms in admissions to high school (Kariya 2017). Among these, the MEXT promoted local boards of education to adopt multidimensional assessments of students in admissions, including not only looking at academic talent but also other aspects of applicants such as extracurricular activities, behavioral and attitudinal characteristics, aptitude, and personality. This most often took the form of school recommendation submitted by junior high school principals to senior high schools as an essential part of admission application, so that it was called recommendation admissions (suisen nyūshi in Japanese). This avenue has since become widely adopted by local boards of education. To further avoid relying wholly on exam score-based school selection, the MEXT also prohibited administering mock exams in public junior high schools in 1995. Thus, more emphasis was put on respecting students' aptitudes and own choice through school counseling in junior high schools, which aimed to help students choose which high schools to apply to.

The use of the multifaceted admission criteria and admission students' own choices was an attempt to mitigate the negative effects of "exam-only"-based admissions, even though – in actuality – formal admissions still utilized the scores of entrance examinations as the primary standard for selection. Significantly, underneath those policy changes, we can find a new logic and rationale in the MEXT, which was expressed in their shift away from regarding students as a mere subject of meritocratic selection toward respecting individuals as agency who could make their own choice in learning and choosing a school. In this sense, "individualization" as a mainstream ideology led to education policies aimed at mitigating rigorous meritocratic competition.

17.5.2 Curricula and Pedagogic Reforms to Transform "Cramming Knowledge" Learning

Under the same logic, curricula and pedagogic reforms aiming to change cramming knowledge style learning were designed and implemented from the early 1990s and onward. AHCER pointed out in the late 1980s:

> The society of the future will require us not merely to acquire knowledge and information, but to further develop the ability to express, create, think with our heads, and to make an appropriate use of that knowledge and information. Creativity is closely connected to individuality, and only when individuality is fostered can creativity be nourished. (AHCER 1988, p. 278)

To transform learning "merely to acquire knowledge and information" into that which could "develop the ability to express, create, think with our heads," the Ministry emphasized that creativity and individuality were the key to education. Such a statement is obviously founded on the judgment that learning "merely to acquire knowledge and information" had been necessary only under catch-up modernization but had also become obsolete, and obstacles in the post-catch-up modernity where "the ability to express, create, think with our heads" would now become of importance (AHCER 1988, p. 278).

Accordingly, on the grounds of fostering greater respect for students' individuality, two main curriculum and pedagogy reforms were implemented in 1992 and 2002, respectively; the former introduced new ways of teaching and learning called *atarashii gakuryokukan* or "a new concept of academic achievements/ability" in English, and the latter was called "relaxed education reforms" or *yutori kyoiku* in Japanese.

As for the 1992 reform, the MEXT published and distributed a guidebook to public elementary school teachers to explain what the new concept meant in terms of actual classroom practices:

> From now on it is important for teachers to see children as having the desire to improve themselves, to seek for a better life, and possess a variety of good qualities and potential unique to them as individuals. For education to make best use of children's individual assets, it is inevitable and necessary that students' self-directed learning activities must come to be respected. We understand that intrinsic learning motivations must be the basis, which supports and motivates learning related-activities. (MEXT 1993, p. 14)

In implementing educational practices to encourage students' self-directed learning, the role of teachers had to change, according this logic, to a supporter of children by standing by their side rather than one-sidedly instilling knowledge into students. From the expressions such as "students' self-directed learning activities" and "intrinsic learning motivations," it is obvious that the principle behind the introduction of this new pedagogy labeled "a new concept of academic achievements/ability" was also founded on the principle of individualization.

The 2002 curriculum reforms further deepened the direction first set out in the 1992 reforms. To increase experiential learning in classrooms from elementary to upper secondary level, the reforms introduced so-called integrated learning classes.

According to Bernstein's education code theory (Bernstein 2003), in integrated learning classes, "classification" between barriers among subjects became blurred, and "framing" in teaching and learning controlled by a teacher was loosened to promote student self-learning, i.e., one that would be free from one-sided cramming knowledge learning. To give more "room to grow" (*yutori*, in Japanese) as well to reduce exam pressure on students, the relaxed education reforms also reduced 30% of textbook content in tandem with decreasing the number of days in school per year (by taking off all Saturdays).[7] As a representative example out of a range of government policy documents emphasizing the premises of the reforms, a 1999 White Paper on Education's front page offers an answer to the question, "Why is educational reform necessary now?":

> (I)ncreased competition in examinations has resulted in school education being reduced to a form in which knowledge is one-sidedly instilled in students, thus leading to the neglect of education and activities that cultivate thinking faculties, creativity, and humanness. Indeed, with the excessive emphasis placed on equal opportunities in education, the original concept of education in accordance with the individuality and capabilities of each and every child has not been taken into full consideration. These are many points upon which we must reflect. (MEXT 1999)

Here the MEXT argues that learning in the form of one-sidedly instilling knowledge in students can be attributed to "increased competition in examinations," a typical symptom of Japan's national meritocracy. Uniform education, depicted as one "with excessive emphasis placed on equal opportunities in education," was also blamed for education that *sacrificed* individuality and the capabilities of each child. Meritocratic education with uniformity, which was once regarded as a successful apparatus, here came to be perceived as a chief obstacle preventing education respecting individuality, all of which was now viewed as evident *sacrifice*. Such a way of constructing educational problems led the MEXT to insist that its solutions must take the form of "individualization" in education.

17.6 What Logics Were Operating Behind the Scene?

Respect for individuality in Japanese education, as a main principle leading reform since the mid-1980s, reflects the Japanese ways of individualization arising after the end of catch-up modernity, as it appeared in the minds of policymakers. Why individuality? How and why have the ideologies of individualism and societal movement toward individualization emerged over the transition to the post-catch-up modernity? What logic forged the association between the necessity of individualization and the perception of the end of catch-up? An official governmental report published in 1980 provides the answer to these questions. A blue-ribbon council

[7] Some of the private schools even rejected the change in number of school days and maintained the textbook contents, which gave rise to "bright flight," that is, some middle-class parents send their bright children to those private secondary schools to avoid risks of failures in the reforms.

under the Prime Minister Ōhira Masayoshi in 1980 (Ōhira Seisaku Kenkyūkai) was outstanding in terms of its clarity and tangibility as an official statement that Japan had completed catching-up with the West. Its Report No. 7, titled Economic Administration in an Age of Culture (1980), noted that:

> Japan's modernization (industrialization and westernization) and the maturation of it into a highly industrial society implies the end of any models involving the need to align to, or to "catch-up with." From now on, *we need to find our own path to follow*. (Age of Culture Economic Management Group 1980, p. 14, emphasis added)

Once Japan had achieved its goal of "catching-up," the Council mandated that the Japanese "need to find our own path to follow" and need to go its own way without following "any models" from outside. In corresponding to this mandate in the education sphere, AHCER maintained the importance of respecting and nurturing individuality in education through promoting individualization in learning. Without nurturing independent and autonomous individuals, political leaders believed there would be no way for Japan to "find our own path to follow." The association of the logics – independent Japanese citizens with individuality should enable future Japan to pursue "our own path" – is an obviously a product of transitional phase to post-catch-up modernity, being indicative of reflections in modernity after the perceived end of catch-up modernization.

Another important document depicting the government's premises underneath the curriculum and pedagogy reforms is found in the report of the National Council on Curriculum that proposed the relaxed education in 1998. It states:

> Taking account of rapidly changing current society, it is of crucial importance that education should be transformed from the one clinging to instill knowledge in students to the one nurturing competences among students to learn and think themselves as self-learners. For this sake, it is necessary to provoke active learning practices in classroom teaching in which students can acquire self-motivation to learn independently, abilities to think logically, deliver their own thoughts appropriately, discover and solve problems, establish intellectual foundations for creativity, and take actions independently and autonomously in accordance to rapidly changing society, all of which should undergo through their curiosity, exploration and trials and errors in learning. (MEXT 1998)

Here again, we find strong assumptions that emphasize the importance of respecting students' individuality and independence, which is viewed as a commonly shared value within the government's efforts to make a smooth transition from catch-up to the post-catch-up modernity aimed at "find[ing] our own path to follow."

This represents the typical mind-set among Japanese political and intellectual leaders at the time; but it also reflects the way of recognizing Japan's past as catch-up modernization, one in which Japanese had to borrow and copy advanced knowledge and "models" from the west under the restricted resources. For the sake of this, building an efficient national meritocratic education was prioritized at the *sacrifice* of other aims such as nurturing individuality and independence among young Japanese. From within the catching-up mind-set, as expressed above, problems in Japan's education and society were constructed through the lens of their common perceptions about Japanese society as one lacking in independent individuals. Political and intellectual leaders attribute problems to national meritocracy, which

was considered to fail in nurturing independent individuals over the period of catching-up as the *sacrifice* of those qualities.

The logic supporting the attribution to the meritocracy works in this way: the efficient borrowing and copying advanced knowledge from the west ordained Japanese not only become independent individuals or critical thinkers but also become obedient and subordinate learners or *students* under the instructions of the advanced west.[8] They were also convinced that undergoing the harsh competitions in the meritocratic education, Japanese youth were domesticated to adjust themselves to the one-sided instilment of knowledge to pass examinations. Japanese leaders tended to even deny the potential that Japanese had their own creativity, individuality, and/or independent personality at least in the Japanese cultural and historical context. In their belief, therefore, fixing these weaknesses of Japanese through reformed education could enable newly educated Japanese to adjust themselves to rapidly changing society and globalized world by standing on their own feet and "find[ing] our own path to follow."

Ironically, however, despite their official announcement of the necessity for finding "our own path to follow," those new goals set in education reforms since the mid-1980s are all derived from the "learner-centered' ideology, born in the west. Idealized, independent learners with intrinsic learning motivation are also modelled from the western educational thoughts. Despite their hesitation in the future borrowing of advanced knowledge and modelling from the west, Japanese leaders' mind-sets are to some extent, unconsciously or unintentionally, still clinging with the views of "looking west."

Such paradoxical reflections are typical of those who undertook catch-up modernization and then reached the transitional phase to post-catch-up modernity. In this sense, such mind-sets or the zeitgeist of catch-up modernizers continued to have an impact on the way of constructing problems in education and their pursued solutions to those problems. Their insistence on and admiration for individuality and independent individuals were coined by such reflections on the process toward post-catch-up modernity. Japan's experience in undergoing the transition from catch-up to post-catch-up modernization, thus, is evidence that reflections in modernity are influenced not only by perceived past achievements but also by perceptions of what are *sacrificed* underneath these achievements during catch-up-style modernization. Because of this nature of setting new goals and launching reforms toward the post-catch-up stage, goals become harder to attain.

Why is it difficult to attain these goals? The difficulty comes from the habitus of constructing the problems. Through the habitus, the goals in reforms are likely set as recovering *something sacrificed* in the process of catch-up. Such a mind-set results in policies aiming to remove perceived hazards, i.e., those things preventing emerging those *somethings sacrificed*, as discussed earlier. Eradicating the hazards or "necessary evils," however, could not possibly automatically produce desired outcomes, i.e., not recovering those *somethings* previously *sacrificed*, particularly in under-resourced circumstances (Kariya 2013b). Nonetheless, discovery of *some-*

[8] As for theory of deficiency and "de-axialization," see Rappleye in this volume.

thing sacrificed and deficient in the catch-up period sets a common knowledge base on which problems in education and society are constructed: reform discourses and reforms converge around the pillar of discovering those things *sacrificed*. The more the knowledge base of *sacrifices* is shared and taken for granted among leaders, the more easily and extensively the ways of constructing problems are accepted without thorough and realistic investigations of the causalities underlying those problems. Eradicate the evils, and then we will recover *something sacrificed* – this is the all-too-simple logic operating behind the scene in the transitional phase to the post-catch-up modernity. The evil was, of course, here deemed to be the exam-driven, meritocratic education.

Furthermore, from the analysis above, we can theorize logic operating and associating in between the paradoxes of meritocracy and the theory of deficiency (Sonoda 1991, Rappleye, Chap. 4 in this volume) as follows. To repair the gaps between past successes, present problems, and future necessities is viewed and constructed through the abovementioned views on educational problems. As discussed earlier, gaps are indicative of paradoxes derived from past successes in national meritocracy: once regarded as great successes in establishing efficient education system to promote catch-up modernization. Nevertheless, encountering the transitional stage to post-catch-up modernity, political leaders began regarding the Japanese national meritocracy as a generator to produce a constraint, one preventing the development of new competencies and skills necessary in a global era. This is because meritocracy under "catch-up" are believed to *sacrifice* those new competencies for these skills to develop; therefore leaders recognize a dearth of those skills necessitated as independent individuals in the global era. The rise and the fall of meritocracy are linked in such a way via a folk theory of sacrifice and deficiency. This type of reflection on modernity itself originates in a specific path of the dependency of modernization: the reflexivity in post-catch-up modernity adhered to by a catching-up mentality, which differs from the experience of countries that did not experience such a clear-cut transition to post-catch-up modernity. Hence, one could say that the folk theory of sacrifice and deficiency is the pivotal nexus in Japan's reflexive modernity.

17.7 Conclusion: Unintended Results Consequences?

By nature, the habitus of constructing problems likely simplifies the understanding and interpretation of how the problems are caused and can be solved. This is partly because the folk theory of deficiency tends to lack realistic means to achieve the goals (Kariya forthcoming) and partly because the perceived paradoxical turnover of the past success into present failure attracts leaders too readily willing to identify with problems and to find solutions based on the aforementioned knowledge base.

This simplification and the inevitably oversimplified solution that results frequently fail to pay enough attention to potential unintended results in the reforms: expanding inequality in education. As examined in my earlier works, admission

reforms created an "incentive divide" for hardworking among students along the social class line by reducing the exam pressures and blurring the clarity of selection criteria (Kariya 2013a). The more complicated processes in multidimensional assessments in admissions also have expanded inequality in school choice among students from different socioeconomic background (Kariya 2017). The continuous curricula and pedagogical reforms toward individualization of learning, which were implemented in under-resourced circumstances, have expanded the gaps in student academic achievements both in conventional test scores and in new skills such as problem-solving and communications demanded in the new curricula (Kariya 2016).

The recent curricula reforms implemented in 2008 and the next one planned for 2020 are also founded on the same ideology of individualization. The newest national curricula reforms propose the introduction of "active learning" to promote further individualization in learning, but unless enough resources are invested and clear guidelines for teachers are provided – a highly unlikely prospect – those idealistic curricula centered on the principle of individualization may fail and could even increase inequalities in education further.

Emphasis on English language skills also carries the potential to expand inequality. From 2008, English activities have been introduced in elementary schools, and in the 2020 revision, these are planned to expand starting from third grade (currently they only cover fifth and sixth grades). Under the current circumstances, however, teachers are not well trained nor certified in teaching English in many elementary schools. Such under-resourced situations could divide students into those who are supported by their highly educated and wealthier parents and those otherwise. These inequalities in education in different settings are well researched and documented in recent sociological research of Japanese education (Kariya 2013a; Matsuoka 2015; Yamada 2014; Shimizu and Takada 2016). Nonetheless, the government reforms have stuck with the same ideology of individualization, and the government has continuously failed in solving the problem of under-resourced situations in public education that is a prerequisite for achieving their ambitious goals (see Nakazawa, Chap. 2 in this volume).

Against these backdrops of recent tendencies in Japanese education, further promotion of individualization in education, which is the main product of reflexive and paradoxical modernity in the transition to the post-catch-up modernity, as the primary pull factor (Han and Shim 2010), might conflate and resonate with other forces pushing toward individualization, i.e., those proceeding under the risk society (Beck 1992) led by the global impact of neoliberal reforms in the economy (Suzuki et al. 2010). The conflation and resonance between the two lines of individualization is likely to intensify the trend in expanding inequality in education, even while it provides easy justification to blame individuals' failure in education as a matter of personal responsibility. Intentionally or unintentionally, the two individualizations are liable to worsen educational inequality.

Meritocracy in its nature, from the pessimist view, should result in inequality in the real world, as Michal Young (2001) himself lamented and warned a half century later since his epoch-making book publication (Young 1958). The envisaged future of a reformed Japanese meritocracy, more ironically and paradoxically, could inten-

sify this tendency even further by the conflation of two individualizations. It is ironic that the mitigated competitions and pursuing "genuine education" by eradicating the "evil" in competitive meritocracy have produced little to actually be aimed for, even while contributed to expanding inequality in education. This paradoxical result is to be produced by the very reflections in modernity. Reflexive modernity in the post-catch-up modernization makes its reflections depend on its past path to the modernity, yet reflections can be distorted depending on how accurately the past paths are observed and understood. One cannot understand the present state of Japanese education without recognizing the habitus of constructing problems born in the catch-up experience that still shapes the policy and research field today.

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