

## Evolution of education and political ideologies in modern Japan: From Meiji Restoration to post-war reforms

Evolución de la educación y las ideologías políticas en el Japón moderno: de la Restauración Meiji a las reformas de posguerra

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### Abstract

This study examines the evolution of education and political ideologies in modern Japan, from the Meiji Restoration to the post-World War II era. Using a qualitative historical methodology, it analyzes primary and secondary sources to explore the interplay between educational reforms and political shifts, focusing on key policies and their societal impacts. The research highlights how education both shaped and was shaped by political ideologies, contributing to Japan's modernization and democratic transition. Contributions include a comprehensive timeline spanning over a century, an interdisciplinary approach bridging educational history and political science, and a critical analysis of ideological shifts in education. The study also emphasizes the post-war democratic transition, offering contemporary

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relevance and policy implications for current educational challenges. By tracing these developments, it provides insights into the complex relationship between education, politics, and national identity in modern Japan.

**Keywords:** Meiji Restoration, Japanese education, political ideology, educational reform, post-war Japan.

## Resumen

*El presente estudio examina la evolución de la educación y las ideologías políticas en el Japón moderno, desde la Restauración Meiji hasta la era posterior a la Segunda Guerra Mundial. A través de una metodología histórica cualitativa, se analizan fuentes primarias y secundarias para explorar la relación entre las reformas educativas y los cambios políticos, con un enfoque en las principales políticas y su impacto en la sociedad. La investigación destaca cómo la educación moldeó y fue moldeada por las ideologías políticas, contribuyendo a la modernización y transición democrática de Japón. Entre sus aportaciones, el estudio ofrece una línea del tiempo que abarca más de un siglo, un enfoque interdisciplinario que une la historia de la educación con la ciencia política, y un análisis crítico de los cambios ideológicos en la educación. Asimismo, enfatiza la transición democrática en el periodo de posguerra, aportando relevancia contemporánea e implicaciones para las políticas educativas actuales. Al rastrear estos desarrollos, el estudio proporciona una visión profunda de la compleja relación entre educación, política e identidad nacional en el Japón moderno.*

**Palabras clave:** Restauración Meiji, educación en Japón, ideología política, reforma educativa, Japón de posguerra.

## Introduction

The evolution of education and political ideologies in modern Japan represents one of the most remarkable transformations in educational history, serving as a compelling lens through which to examine the complex interplay between societal change, political philosophy, and pedagogical practice. From the seismic shifts of the Meiji Restoration to the dramatic reforms of the post-war era, Japan's educational journey reflects not merely institutional changes but profound transformations in national identity, cultural values, and political consciousness.

This study undertakes a comprehensive analysis of this evolution, examining how Japan's education system has both shaped and been shaped by the nation's political ideologies over the past 150 years. By tracing the trajectory from the Meiji period's ambitious modernization efforts through the militaristic turn of the early 20th century to the democratic reforms under American occupation, we illuminate the pivotal role of education in Japan's remarkable metamorphosis from feudal isolation to global economic power.

Our analysis reveals several key themes that have remained constant throughout this evolution:

1. The complex relationship between state authority and educational autonomy, particularly in the realm of moral and political education.
2. The enduring influence of historical legacies on contemporary educational practices and policies.
3. The recurring debate over the purpose of education—whether to serve national goals or individual development.
4. The tension between modernization and tradition, as Japan sought to adapt Western educational models while preserving its cultural heritage.

Drawing on extensive primary and secondary sources, this study adopts a multidisciplinary approach, combining insights from educational history, political science, and sociology. We argue that Japan's educational evolution is deeply intertwined with broader political, social, and cultural transformations, rather than existing in isolation.

As Japan navigates contemporary challenges—such as demographic shifts and globalization—understanding this historical context is essential for policymakers, educators, and scholars. By examining key historical periods, policies, and reforms, this study highlights the dynamic relationship between education, political ideology, and societal change. Ultimately, Japan's educational history not only reflects its national identity but also offers valuable lessons for understanding the role of education in shaping societies during periods of rapid global transformation.

## Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this study is grounded in several key concepts that help illuminate the complex relationships between education, political ideology, and social change in modern Japan:

1. **Critical theory and ideological apparatus:** The framework incorporates elements of critical theory, particularly Althusser's concept of ideological state apparatuses. Ide (2009) apply this perspective to examine how education has been used as a means of ideological reproduction and social control, especially during the pre-war period with the implementation of the Imperial Rescript on Education (The Journal of Education, 1908).
2. **Cultural capital and social reproduction:** Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and social reproduction are applied to analyze how the Japanese educational system has both challenged and reinforced social hierarchies throughout different historical periods. Bamkin (2019) use this framework to examine the role of

- moral education in Japanese schools and its implications for social stratification.
3. Globalization and educational policy transfer: Theories of globalization and policy transfer are employed to examine how Japan's educational policies have been influenced by international trends, particularly in the post-war period. Yonezawa (2003) demonstrate how this perspective helps explain the adoption of democratic education principles and more recent reforms in response to global economic pressures.
  4. Institutional theory and path dependency: The study incorporates institutional theory to understand the persistence of certain educational practices and ideologies despite major political shifts. Beauchamp (1987) apply the concept of path dependency to explain how historical legacies continue to influence contemporary educational policies in Japan.
  5. Modernization theory and educational reform: This study employs modernization theory to understand Japan's rapid transition from a feudal to an industrial society during the Meiji era. According to Liu (2019), education played a crucial role in facilitating this social and economic change. The Meiji government's emphasis on education as a tool for national development aligns closely with this theoretical perspective.
  6. Post-colonial theory and educational reforms: To analyze the impact of the Allied Occupation on Japan's post-war educational system, this study draws on post-colonial theory. Murakami and Bunkichi (1956) argue that this approach helps in understanding the complex dynamics of adopting Western educational models while maintaining aspects of Japanese cultural identity.
  7. State-society relations and educational policy: Drawing on concepts from political sociology, this study examines the changing relationship between the state and society as reflected in educational policies. Okada (2012) argue that different political regimes in Japan used education to shape national identity and promote specific ideologies, illustrating the dynamic interplay between state power and educational institutions.

By integrating these theoretical perspectives, this study provides a comprehensive lens through which to examine the complex relationships between education, political ideology, and social change in modern Japan. It allows for a nuanced analysis of how educational policies and practices have both shaped and been shaped by broader political and social currents from the Meiji era to the present day.

## Meiji Restoration and educational reforms

### Emperor Meiji and the Meiji Era (1868–1912)

The Meiji Restoration marked a pivotal turning point in Japanese history, ushering in an era of rapid modernization and Westernization. Prior to this period, Japan had been governed by the Tokugawa shogunate, which enforced a policy of *sakoku* (national isolation) for over two centuries. This isolationist model restricted foreign influence and trade, allowing Japan to develop a unique cultural and political identity. However, by the mid-19th century, external pressures from Western powers—exemplified by the arrival of Commodore Matthew Perry’s “Black Ships” in 1853—exposed the vulnerabilities of Japan’s feudal system. The shogunate’s inability to resist foreign demands for trade and diplomatic relations highlighted the urgent need for modernization.

Emperor Meiji (Mutsuhito), who ascended to the throne in 1867, played a significant role in this transformation. Under his reign, Japan embarked on an ambitious program of reforms aimed at transforming the country from a feudal society into a modern nation-state capable of competing with Western powers (Griffis, 1912). The Meiji leaders recognized that adopting Western technologies, institutions, and educational systems was essential to preserving Japan’s sovereignty and achieving parity with the industrialized world. Thus, the Meiji Restoration was not merely a political revolution but a comprehensive societal overhaul, driven by the necessity to respond to both internal stagnation and external threats.

Education was at the forefront of these reforms, recognized as a crucial tool for national development and modernization. The Meiji government quickly moved to establish a modern, centralized educational system that would serve as the foundation for Japan’s transformation. This marked a significant departure from the decentralized and class-based education of the Tokugawa period.

In 1872, the government promulgated the *Gakusei* (school system order), which laid the groundwork for a new national education system. This landmark legislation established a three-tier school system consisting of elementary, secondary, and university levels, and mandated compulsory education for all children regardless of social class or gender (Yu, 1872). The *Gakusei* represented a radical departure from the previous system, aiming to create a more egalitarian and modernized society through education.

The influence of Western educational models was unmistakable in the early reforms of the Meiji era. Japanese scholars and officials, including the visionary educator Mori Arinori, embarked on study missions abroad to examine Western educational systems firsthand. These journeys, particularly to countries like the United States, Germany, and

France, provided invaluable insights into modern pedagogical practices, administrative structures, and curricula. Upon their return, these reformers adapted and integrated these ideas into Japan's nascent education system, creating a unique synthesis of Western methodologies and traditional Japanese values (Swale, 2013). This hybrid approach not only facilitated Japan's rapid modernization but also ensured that education remained deeply rooted in the nation's cultural ethos—a defining characteristic of Japanese education that persists to this day. However, the implementation of these ambitious reforms was fraught with challenges. The rapid pace of change sparked significant resistance from conservative factions within Japanese society. Traditionalists, particularly those aligned with the samurai class and rural elites, viewed the reforms as a direct threat to Japan's cultural identity and social order. The samurai, who had enjoyed centuries of privilege under the feudal system, saw their status and economic power erode as the Meiji government dismantled the class hierarchy and introduced merit-based institutions. Similarly, rural communities often perceived the centralized education system as an imposition of foreign values and a disruption of local traditions. This resistance was not merely ideological; it was also fueled by the practical difficulties of implementing sweeping reforms across a geographically and culturally diverse nation.

Financing the new educational system posed another formidable challenge. The Meiji government, already burdened by the costs of industrialization, military modernization, and infrastructure development, faced severe fiscal constraints. While education was recognized as a cornerstone of national progress, securing adequate funding for schools, teacher salaries, and educational materials proved to be a persistent struggle. To address this, the government introduced a system of local taxation to support schools. However, this approach often placed a disproportionate financial burden on rural communities, exacerbating existing inequalities and fueling further discontent.

Teacher training emerged yet another critical obstacle. The rapid expansion of the education system created an urgent demand for qualified teachers, but Japan lacked the infrastructure to train them in sufficient numbers. Initially, the government relied heavily on foreign advisors and imported Western teaching methods. While this approach provided a temporary solution, it was unsustainable in the long term. Over time, the establishment of teacher training schools (*shihan gakkō*) helped bridge this gap. Nevertheless, the quality and consistency of instruction varied widely, particularly in rural areas, where access to resources and trained educators remained limited.

Despite these formidable obstacles, the Meiji government's commitment to education as a tool for national strengthening never wavered. The reforms were driven by a profound belief that an educated populace was essential for Japan's survival and success

in an increasingly competitive global order. By navigating resistance, addressing financial constraints, and overcoming logistical challenges, the Meiji era laid the foundation for Japan's modern education system. This system would not only propel Japan's transformation into a major world power but also serve as a model for other nations grappling with the complexities of modernization.

In retrospect, the story of Meiji educational reforms is not merely one of policy implementation but a testament to the resilience and adaptability of a nation in transition. It underscores the intricate interplay between tradition and innovation, local values and global influences, and the enduring belief in education as a catalyst for societal transformation. As Japan continues to navigate the challenges of the 21st century, the lessons of the Meiji era remain profoundly relevant, offering insights into the power of education to shape nations and define their futures.

### **Establishment of modern educational institutions**

The Meiji period witnessed the establishment of numerous modern educational institutions that would play a pivotal role in Japan's modernization process. Among these, the creation of the University of Tokyo in 1877 (initially established as Tokyo University) stands out as a landmark achievement. As Japan's first modern university, it was designed to be the pinnacle of the new educational system and a center for Western learning and scientific research (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology [MEXT], 2022). Other notable institutions, such as Waseda University (founded in 1882 as Tokyo Senmon Gakko), also emerged during this period, producing an educated elite that would lead Japan's modernization efforts in politics, industry, and academia (Waseda University, 2020). However, while higher education institutions captured much of the historical spotlight, the Meiji government's most transformative achievement was its focus on primary education. Recognizing that a literate and educated populace was essential for national progress, the government prioritized the expansion of elementary schools across the country. The 1872 *Gakusei* (Education System Order) laid the groundwork for a nationwide system of compulsory primary education, aiming to ensure that all children, regardless of social class or gender, had access to basic schooling. By 1915, this vision had become a reality, with 98.5% of school-age children enrolled in primary schools—a remarkable achievement that far outpaced many Western nations at the time.

The rapid expansion of primary education was not without challenges. Rural areas faced significant obstacles, including a lack of infrastructure, funding, and trained teachers. To address these issues, the government established normal schools (teacher training institutions) to prepare educators who could implement the new curriculum and spread

modern knowledge throughout the country. These efforts were complemented by the introduction of standardized textbooks and a centralized curriculum, which emphasized moral education, practical skills, and loyalty to the state.

The prioritization of primary education had profound implications for Japanese society. It not only fostered universal literacy but also created a skilled workforce that supported Japan's industrialization and economic growth. Moreover, it helped to unify the nation by instilling a shared sense of identity and purpose among its citizens. While higher education remained accessible to only a small elite—less than 1% of the population attended university in the early Meiji period—the emphasis on primary education ensured that the benefits of modernization reached all levels of society.

In retrospect, the Meiji government's dual focus on both primary and higher education reflects a nuanced understanding of the role of education in nation-building. While elite institutions like the University of Tokyo and Waseda University produced the leaders and innovators who drove Japan's modernization, the widespread availability of primary education ensured that the entire population could contribute to and benefit from the nation's progress. This balanced approach remains one of the most enduring legacies of the Meiji era, underscoring the transformative power of education in shaping a nation's destiny.

### **The Imperial Rescript on Education (1890)**

As Japan's modernization progressed, concerns arose among conservative elements about the potential loss of traditional values and national identity. In response to these concerns, the Imperial Rescript on Education was issued in 1890. This document, which emphasized loyalty to the emperor, filial piety, and other Confucian virtues, became the cornerstone of moral education in Japanese schools for decades to come.

Ide (2009) argue that the Imperial Rescript on Education served as a powerful ideological tool, blending traditional Japanese values with the goals of the modern state. It reinforced the idea of the emperor as a living deity (*Arahitogami*) and emphasized the unique nature of the Japanese state and people. The Rescript was required to be memorized by all students and was treated with great reverence in schools, illustrating its vital role in shaping the moral and ideological landscape of Japanese education.

The impact of the Imperial Rescript on Education was profound and long-lasting. It effectively nationalized Shinto and promoted a form of state-sponsored nationalism that would contribute to the rise of militarism in the following decades. The tension between modernization and traditional values embodied in the Rescript would continue to be a defining feature of Japanese education throughout the pre-war period.



## Interwar period and political movements

### Taishō Democracy (1912-1926)

The Taishō period, named after Emperor Taishō who reigned from 1912 to 1926, is often referred to as the era of “Taishō Democracy.” This period saw a significant expansion of political participation and a flourishing of liberal thought in Japan. The educational landscape also experienced notable changes during this time, reflecting broader societal shifts towards greater democracy and individual rights.

According to Hoston (1984), the Taishō period witnessed a relaxation of the strict ideological control that had characterized the late Meiji era. This led to a more diverse and vibrant intellectual climate, with innovative ideas about democracy, individual rights, and social reform gaining traction. The education system, while still largely adhering to the principles set forth in the Imperial Rescript on Education, began to incorporate some of these innovative ideas.

One significant development during this period was the expansion of higher education. The number of universities and specialized schools increased, providing greater educational opportunities for a broader segment of the population. This expansion of higher education contributed to the growth of a more politically aware and active urban middle class.

The influence of progressive educational theories from the West, such as those of John Dewey, began to be felt in Japanese pedagogical circles (Sullivan, 1966). Some educators advocated for more child-centered approaches and experimented with new teaching methods that emphasized critical thinking and individual expression. However, these progressive trends remained limited in scope and often faced resistance from more conservative elements within the education system.

### Rise of Nationalist sentiments and ideological movements

Despite the democratic trends of the Taishō period, this era also saw the emergence of more radical nationalist and militarist ideologies. These ideologies would gain increasing influence in the education system as Japan moved into the Shōwa period (1926-1989) and towards the Pacific War (1941-1945).

The Great Japan Youth Party (*Dai-Nippon Seinen-tō*), founded in 1937, exemplifies the type of nationalist youth organizations that emerged during this period. According to Sims (2001), such organizations aimed to indoctrinate Japanese youth with militaristic ideologies and prepare them for potential military service. The curriculum in schools began to place greater emphasis on physical education and military drills, reflecting the growing influence of militarist thought.

The Great Japan Sincerity Association (*Dai Nippon Sekisei-kai*) was another influential organization during this period. As Grajdanzev (1943) notes, its stated aim was to teach Japanese youth basic survival skills, first aid, cultural lessons, and basic weapons training. The increasing prominence of such organizations in the education of Japanese youth reflects the growing militarization of Japanese society in the lead-up to World War II.

These developments marked a significant shift from the more liberal trends of the early Taishō period. The education system increasingly became a tool for promoting nationalist ideology and preparing the nation for war. This shift would reach its peak in the years immediately preceding and during World War II, with profound consequences for Japanese society and education.

## **World War II and occupation**

### **Militarization of education**

As Japan moved towards war in the 1930s and early 1940s, the education system became increasingly militarized. The Imperial Rescript to Soldiers and Sailors (*Gunjin Chokuyū*), issued in 1882, took on renewed importance during this period (Nakamura & Tobe, 1988). This document, which emphasized absolute loyalty to the emperor and willingness to sacrifice one's life for the nation, became required reading in schools alongside the Imperial Rescript on Education.

The curriculum was revised to emphasize nationalist and militarist ideologies. History and civics classes were used to promote a narrative of Japanese superiority and divine right to rule over Asia. Physical education classes increasingly incorporated military-style drills and training.

The concept of the emperor as a living deity (*Arahitogami*) was strongly reinforced in education during this period. Students were taught to view the emperor as the embodiment of the state and to be willing to sacrifice everything for his sake. This ideology reached its peak with the publication of the "Kokutai no Hongi" (Fundamentals of Our National Polity) in 1937, which became required reading in schools and articulated a vision of Japan's unique national essence centered on the emperor.

### **Allied occupation and educational reforms**

The defeat of Japan in World War II led to a dramatic shift in its educational landscape. Under the Allied Occupation led by the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP), General Douglas MacArthur, Japan's education system underwent a radical transformation aimed at demilitarization and democratization.

One of the first actions taken by the Allied occupation authorities in post-war Japan was the removal of militaristic and ultra-nationalist content from textbooks and curricula. This decision was driven by a recognition that the pre-war education system had played a vital role in fostering the ideologies that led Japan into war. The Imperial Rescript on Education, which had been a cornerstone of Japanese education since 1890, was repealed, and State Shinto was disestablished. These measures marked a decisive break with the pre-war ideology that had dominated Japanese education and society.

The decision to overhaul the education system was motivated by several key factors. First, the occupation authorities sought to demilitarize and democratize Japan, ensuring that the country would never again pose a threat to global peace. The pre-war education system had been instrumental in promoting loyalty to the emperor, glorifying military sacrifice, and instilling a sense of racial and cultural superiority. By removing these elements, the authorities aimed to dismantle the ideological foundations of Japanese militarism.

Second, the reforms were intended to address the social and psychological trauma caused by the war. The conflict had left Japan devastated, with millions of lives lost, cities in ruins, and the population grappling with the consequences of defeat. The occupation authorities recognized that continuing to propagate militaristic and ultra-nationalist ideologies would only exacerbate the sense of disillusionment and resentment among the Japanese people (Morito, 1955). By promoting democratic values and peaceful ideals, they hoped to foster a more stable and cooperative social atmosphere.

Third, the reforms were part of a broader effort to align Japan with the values of the international community. The occupation authorities, led by the United States under General Douglas MacArthur, viewed education as a powerful tool for shaping the attitudes and beliefs of future generations. By introducing democratic principles, critical thinking, and respect for human rights into the curriculum, they aimed to create a society that would be compatible with the emerging post-war global order.

The Fundamental Law of Education (*Kyōiku Kihonhō*), passed in 1947, laid the groundwork for a new democratic education system. As noted by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT, 1947), this law guaranteed academic freedom, extended compulsory education from six to nine years, and provided for coeducation. It emphasized individual dignity and the full development of personality, marking a significant departure from the pre-war focus on service to the state.

The U.S. Education Mission to Japan, which arrived in 1946, played a crucial role in shaping these reforms. The mission's recommendations, influenced by American progressive educational theories, emphasized democratic values, critical thinking, and individual development. This led to significant changes in teaching methods and cur-

riculum content, moving away from rote memorization towards more student-centered approaches. However, it is important to note that these reforms were not simply imposed from above. As Murakami and Bunkichi (1956) argue, there was significant input and adaptation from Japanese educators and officials. The result was a hybrid system that incorporated elements of American educational philosophy while retaining aspects of Japanese educational traditions.

### **The role of SCAP in reshaping Japanese education**

The Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP), under the leadership of General Douglas MacArthur, played a pivotal role in reshaping Japanese education during the occupation period (1945–1952). SCAP's Civil Information and Education Section was responsible for overseeing the reform of the Japanese education system, working in conjunction with Japanese officials and educators.

One of SCAP's primary goals was to use education as a tool for democratization and demilitarization. This involved not only changing the content of education but also its structure and administration. The highly centralized pre-war education system was decentralized, with more power given to local boards of education. This was intended to promote democratic participation in educational decision-making at the local level.

SCAP also encouraged the development of teachers' unions as part of its democratization efforts. The Japan Teachers Union (*Nihon Kyōshokuin Kumiai*), formed in 1947, became a powerful force in Japanese education politics. As Aspinall (2001) notes, the union often took a critical stance against conservative government policies in the post-war period. However, the extent of SCAP's influence should not be overstated. While the occupation authorities set broad policy directions, much of the day-to-day implementation of reforms was conducted by Japanese educators and officials. This led to a process of adaptation and negotiation, resulting in a uniquely Japanese interpretation of democratic education.

## **Post-War educational reforms**

### **The Fundamental Law of Education (1947)**

The Fundamental Law of Education, enacted in 1947, stands as a cornerstone of post-war Japanese education reform. This law, deeply influenced by American educational philosophy but adapted to the Japanese context, set forth the basic principles that would guide Japanese education in the democratic era.

Key provisions of the law included:

1. Academic freedom: The law guaranteed academic freedom, particularly in higher education.
2. Coeducation: The law promoted coeducation, marking a notable change from the largely segregated pre-war system.
3. Compulsory education: The period of compulsory education was extended from 6 to 9 years, covering elementary and lower secondary education.
4. Political education: The law mandated education to develop political understanding and judgment necessary for intelligent citizenship in a democratic state.
5. Religious education: The law prohibited religious education for a specific religion in public schools, enforcing the separation of religion and state in education.
6. The right to education: The law guaranteed equal educational opportunity for all, regardless of race, creed, sex, social status, or economic position.

As noted by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT, 1947), the Fundamental Law of Education represented a dramatic shift from the pre-war focus on moral indoctrination and service to the state. Instead, it emphasized the full development of personality, the rearing of people sound in mind and body, and the nurturing of individuals who love truth and justice. However, the implementation of these ideals was not without challenges. As Beauchamp (1971) points out, there was often a gap between the democratic ideals expressed in the law and the realities of educational practice. The deeply ingrained habits and attitudes of the pre-war period did not disappear overnight, and many educators struggled to adapt to the new pedagogical approaches advocated by the law. Moreover, the Fundamental Law of Education became a focal point for ongoing debates about the purpose and nature of education in post-war Japan. Conservative elements, which gained increasing influence in Japanese politics from the 1950s onward, often viewed the law as too heavily influenced by American ideals and insufficiently attentive to traditional Japanese values. These tensions would continue to shape educational policy debates in the decades to come.

### **American influence on educational reform policies**

The influence of American educational philosophy on post-war Japanese education reform was profound and far-reaching. The U.S. Education Mission to Japan, which arrived in 1946, brought with it a wealth of progressive educational ideas that would shape the direction of reform. These ideas, rooted in the philosophies of John Dewey and other progressive educators, emphasized student-centered learning, critical thinking, and education for democratic citizenship.

One of the most significant changes was the shift away from the rigid, exam-oriented education of the pre-war period towards a more holistic approach that emphasized the development of the whole child. This was reflected in the introduction of social studies as a new subject, designed to foster critical thinking about society and prepare students for active citizenship in a democracy.

The influence of American ideas was also evident in changes to teaching methods. Rote memorization, which had been a staple of Japanese education, was discouraged in favor of more interactive and inquiry-based approaches. Group work and class discussions, relatively rare in pre-war Japanese classrooms, were now encouraged as ways to foster cooperation and democratic skills. However, as Shimbori (1960) argue, it would be a mistake to view these reforms as simply an imposition of American ideas onto Japanese education. Rather, there was a complex process of adaptation and negotiation, with Japanese educators and policymakers selectively adopting and modifying American ideas to fit the Japanese context. This resulted in a hybrid system that combined elements of American progressive education with aspects of Japanese educational tradition.

### **The evolution of political education in post-war Japan**

The democratization of Japan following World War II necessitated a fundamental reimagining of political education. The pre-war emphasis on unquestioning loyalty to the emperor and the state was replaced by a new focus on fostering critical thinking and preparing students for active participation in a democratic society.

Arai (2019) notes that this shift was not without its challenges. Many teachers, trained in the pre-war system, struggled to adapt to the new expectations. There were also ongoing debates about how to balance the teaching of democratic principles with respect for Japanese cultural traditions and values.

The content of political education also evolved over time. In the immediate post-war period, there was a strong emphasis on teaching the principles of democracy and the new constitution. However, as Japan moved into the period of high economic growth in the 1960s and 1970s, the focus shifted somewhat towards preparing students for participation in a modern, industrialized society (Abegglen, 1970).

The treatment of sensitive historical issues, particularly Japan's actions during World War II, has been a persistent source of controversy in political education. Fujita (2000) highlight the ongoing debates over history textbooks and how to teach about Japan's wartime past. These debates reflect broader societal tensions over historical memory and national identity in post-war Japan.

## **The role of the Japan Teachers Union in shaping educational policies**

The Japan Teachers Union (*Nihon Kyōshokuin Kumiai*), formed in 1947, has been a significant force in Japanese education politics throughout the post-war period. As Aspinall (2001) notes, the union has often taken a progressive stance, advocating for democratic education, and resisting what it sees as conservative attempts to reintroduce pre-war values into the education system.

The union has been particularly active in debates over the content of history textbooks, the role of moral education in schools, and the place of patriotic symbols like the national flag and anthem in education. Its opposition to the conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) government on these issues has made it a controversial organization, often criticized by conservative politicians and media. However, the influence of the Japan Teachers Union has declined somewhat since its peak in the 1960s and 1970s. Changes in labor laws and shifting public attitudes have reduced its membership and political clout. Nevertheless, it remains an important voice in debates over education policy in Japan.

## **The ongoing debate over moral education**

The role of moral education in Japanese schools has been a contentious issue throughout the post-war period. The pre-war system of moral education, centered on the Imperial Rescript on Education, was dismantled during the occupation. However, conservative elements in Japanese politics have long advocated for a stronger emphasis on moral and patriotic education.

In 1958, moral education was reintroduced as a non-academic subject in Japanese schools. Since then, there have been ongoing debates about its content and implementation. Conservatives have pushed for moral education to play a larger role in fostering patriotism and traditional values, while progressives have warned against a return to the indoctrination of the pre-war period.

Bamkin (2019) argue that these debates reflect broader societal tensions over national identity and values in post-war Japan. The treatment of moral education in schools has become a symbolic battleground for competing visions of Japan's past, present, and future.

In recent years, the government has taken steps to strengthen moral education. In 2015, moral education was upgraded to an official academic subject in elementary and junior high schools. This move was controversial, with critics arguing that it could lead to the imposition of a narrow set of government-approved values on students.

## Education and Japan's changing demographics

Japan's changing demographics, particularly its aging population and low birth rate, have posed significant challenges for the education system. The declining number of school-age children has led to the closure of many schools, particularly in rural areas. This has raised concerns about educational equity, as students in depopulated areas may have less access to educational resources.

At the same time, the aging of Japanese society has led to increased emphasis on lifelong learning and adult education. Universities and other educational institutions have had to adapt to serve an older student population, offering more flexible programs and distance learning options.

The demographic changes have also had implications for education funding and policy. With a shrinking workforce supporting a growing elderly population, there have been debates about how to allocate limited resources between education and other social needs.

## Internationalization and English education

The push for internationalization (*kokusaika*) has been a significant trend in Japanese education since the 1980s. This has been driven by recognition of the need to prepare Japanese students for a more globally interconnected world and economy.

One of the most visible aspects of this trend has been the emphasis on English language education. English has been a compulsory subject in Japanese schools for decades, but there have been ongoing efforts to improve the quality and effectiveness of English education. These have included introducing English classes at earlier grade levels, increasing the number of native English-speaking teachers in schools through programs like the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program, and reforming university entrance exams to place more emphasis on practical English skills. However, as Yamashita and Williams (2002) point out, these efforts have had mixed results. While there has been some improvement in English proficiency among Japanese students, many still struggle with practical communication skills. This has led to ongoing debates about the most effective methods for teaching English in the Japanese context.

The push for internationalization has also included efforts to increase the number of international students in Japan and to send more Japanese students abroad. However, Japan has faced challenges in attracting international students and encouraging Japanese students to study overseas, particularly in comparison to other developed countries.



## Higher education reforms and global competitiveness

Japan's higher education system has undergone significant reforms in recent decades, driven by concerns about global competitiveness and the changing needs of Japanese society and economy. Beauchamp (1987) highlight several key trends in these reforms:

1. Emphasis on practical skills and employability: There has been increasing pressure on universities to produce graduates with the skills needed in the modern workforce. This has led to the expansion of professional graduate schools and increased industry-academia collaboration.
2. Reforms to the entrance examination system: There have been ongoing efforts to reform the notoriously high-pressure university entrance exam system, with the aim of assessing a broader range of skills and reducing the emphasis on rote memorization.
3. The corporatization of national universities: In 2004, national universities were transformed into semi-autonomous corporations. This gave universities more flexibility in management and financing but also increased pressure to secure external funding and demonstrate results.
4. The push for world-class universities: Programs like the "Global 30" and "Top Global University Project" have aimed to raise the international profile of Japanese universities and attract more international students and faculty.

These reforms have had mixed results. While some Japanese universities have improved their positions in global rankings, the overall competitiveness of Japanese higher education in the global market remains a concern. There are also ongoing debates about how to balance the push for global competitiveness with the need to serve domestic educational needs.

## Contemporary developments and challenges

As Japan entered the late 20th and early 21st centuries, its education system faced new challenges and underwent further reforms in response to changing social, economic, and global conditions.

The establishment of the National Council on Educational Reform (*Rinkyoshin*) in 1984 marked a significant moment in the evolution of Japanese education policy. As Hood (2001) discusses, the council's recommendations led to a series of reforms aimed at making the education system more flexible and responsive to individual needs. These included the introduction of a new integrated course of study at the high school level and efforts to reduce the pressure of entrance examinations.

The introduction of the “yutori kyoiku” (relaxed education) policies in the 1980s and 1990s represented an attempt to move away from the intense pressure and rote learning that had characterized much of post-war Japanese education. These policies reduced school hours and curriculum content, aiming to foster creativity and reduce stress on students. However, they also sparked concerns about declining academic standards, leading to their partial reversal in the 2000s.

Globalization has posed both opportunities and challenges for Japanese education. Yonezawa (2003) argue that the pressures of global economic competition have led to increased emphasis on English language education and international exchange programs. At the same time, there have been ongoing debates about how to maintain Japanese cultural identity in an increasingly interconnected world.

The rapid advance of technology has also had a significant impact on Japanese education. The integration of information and communication technologies into classrooms has been a priority, though the pace of change has sometimes lagged that of other developed countries. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated this trend, forcing a rapid shift to online and hybrid learning models.

## Conclusion

The evolution of education and political ideologies in modern Japan, from the Meiji Restoration to the post-war reforms, offers a profound narrative of how a nation’s educational system can serve as both a mirror and a catalyst for broader societal transformation. This journey, marked by seismic shifts and enduring tensions, reveals the intricate interplay between education, political power, and national identity. It is a story not merely of institutional reforms but of a society grappling with the dual imperatives of preserving its cultural heritage while embracing the demands of modernity and global engagement.

The Meiji Restoration laid the foundation for Japan’s educational modernization, driven by the urgent need to respond to external pressures and internal stagnation. The establishment of a centralized, Western-inspired education system was a bold attempt to transform Japan into a modern nation-state capable of competing with Western powers. Yet, this transformation was not without its contradictions. The Meiji era’s emphasis on education as a tool for national strengthening often clashed with the realities of implementing such reforms across a diverse and resistant society. The tension between modernization and tradition, between Western models and Japanese values, became a defining feature of this period, setting the stage for the ideological struggles that would follow.

The pre-war years saw the rise of militarism and nationalism, with education increasingly co-opted as a tool for ideological indoctrination. The Imperial Rescript on Education became a cornerstone of this effort, embedding loyalty to the emperor and the state into the moral fabric of Japanese society. However, this period also sowed the seeds of its own undoing, as the militarization of education contributed to the societal and psychological devastation of World War II. The war's aftermath brought about a dramatic rupture, as the Allied occupation sought to dismantle the ideological foundations of pre-war education and replace them with democratic principles. The Fundamental Law of Education of 1947 marked a decisive break with the past, emphasizing individual dignity, academic freedom, and the development of democratic citizenship.

Yet, the post-war reforms were not merely an imposition of foreign ideals. They represented a complex process of negotiation and adaptation, as Japanese educators and policymakers sought to reconcile democratic principles with the enduring values of Japanese culture. The role of the Japan Teachers Union in advocating for progressive education, the ongoing debates over moral education, and the challenges of balancing tradition with modernity all underscore the dynamic and contested nature of this transformation. The post-war period also highlighted the paradox of using state power to promote democratic education, raising fundamental questions about the nature of democratic learning and the role of external influence in shaping educational systems.

As Japan entered the late 20th and early 21st centuries, its education system faced new challenges, from demographic shifts to the pressures of globalization. The push for internationalization, the integration of technology, and the ongoing debates over educational equity and quality reflect the enduring relevance of the themes that have shaped Japan's educational history. The lessons of the Meiji era—of balancing tradition and innovation, of navigating the tensions between national ambition and individual development—remain profoundly relevant as Japan confronts the challenges of the 21st century.

Accordingly, the evolution of education and political ideologies in modern Japan is a testament to the transformative power of education in shaping nations and defining their futures. It is a story of resilience and adaptation, of continuity and change, and of the enduring quest to balance the demands of tradition with the imperatives of modernity. As Japan continues to navigate the complexities of a rapidly changing world, the insights gleaned from its educational history offer valuable lessons for understanding the role of education in mediating between the past and the future, between the local and the global, and between the individual and the state. In this sense, the story of Japanese education is not merely a historical account but a living narrative, one that continues to evolve and inspire.

## Theoretical implications

Our analysis suggests several theoretical insights of broader significance:

1. Cultural hybridity in educational reform: Rather than viewing educational change as a straightforward process of Westernization or modernization, the Japanese case reveals a more nuanced pattern of selective adaptation and indigenous innovation. This suggests a theoretical framework for understanding educational reform as a process of cultural hybridity.
2. The dialectic of education and political power: The Japanese experience demonstrates that education serves not only as a transmitter of political ideologies but also as a site of resistance and negotiation. The pendulum swing between centralization and autonomy throughout Japanese educational history reflects this ongoing dialectic.
3. The paradox of educational democratization: The post-war reforms highlight the inherent tensions in using state power to impose democratic education, raising important questions about the nature of democratic learning and the role of external influence in educational change.

## Historical continuities and ruptures

Throughout the periods examined, several key themes emerge:

1. Persistent tensions:
  - Between centralization and local autonomy.
  - Between fostering national identity and embracing international perspectives.
  - Between maintaining cultural traditions and adapting to global trends.
2. Evolving concepts of citizenship: The transformation from imperial subjects to democratic citizens represents not just a change in political status but a fundamental shift in educational philosophy and practice.
3. The role of crisis in educational change: Major educational reforms have often emerged from periods of national crisis, suggesting the deep connection between educational policy and broader societal transformations.

## Contemporary relevance and future directions

The historical analysis presented here has direct implications for understanding contemporary challenges in Japanese education:

1. Demographic challenges: The current struggle with an aging population and declining birth rates must be understood within the historical context of education's role in national development.

2. Globalization and identity: Contemporary debates about internationalization and English education reflect longstanding tensions between national identity and global engagement.
3. Technology and tradition: The push to modernize education through technology while preserving traditional pedagogical values echoes historical patterns of selective adaptation.

### Future research directions

This study suggests several promising avenues for future research:

1. Comparative studies examining similar transitions in other East Asian contexts.
2. Investigation of the long-term impacts of educational ideologies on social mobility and economic development.
3. More detailed analysis of the role of non-state actors in educational change.

### Final reflections

The story of modern Japanese education is, in many ways, the story of modernity itself—a narrative of how societies negotiate between tradition and change, between national ambition and individual rights, between cultural preservation and global engagement. As Japan faces new challenges in the 21st century, from artificial intelligence to climate change, the historical patterns and insights identified in this study remain relevant.

The essential question that emerged in the Meiji era remains pertinent today: How can education serve both national purposes and individual development? The ongoing negotiation of this question, as our study shows, is not merely an educational issue but a fundamental aspect of modern political and social life.

As we look to the future, the Japanese experience offers valuable lessons about the possibilities and limitations of educational reform, the complex relationship between education and political ideology, and the enduring importance of finding balance between continuity and change. In an era of global uncertainty and rapid transformation, these lessons remain as relevant as ever.

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## Appendixes

### Appendix A: Chronology of key educational reforms

Table A1.  
Timeline of major educational reforms in Modern Japan

Year	Reform/Event	Description	Key Figures	Impact
1872	Gakusei (Education System Order)	Established a modern, centralized education system	Mori Arinori	Introducing compulsory education
1877	Founding of Tokyo University	First modern university in Japan	-	Created center for Western learning
1890	Imperial Rescript on Education	Established moral education guidelines	Emperor Meiji	Emphasized loyalty to emperor
1947	Fundamental Law of Education	Reformed education system post-WWII	SCAP	Introducing democratic principles
1958	Reintroduction of Moral Education	Added as non-academic subject	-	Sparked debates over values education
2006	Revision of Fundamental Law	Updated educational principles	Shinzo Abe	Emphasized patriotism

## Appendix B: Educational statistics

Table B1.  
Enrollment rates in Japanese education (%)

Year	Elementary	Secondary	Higher education
1873	28.1	-	-
1900	81.5	2.9	0.1
1935	99.6	12.6	3.1
1950	99.8	42.5	10.3
1975	99.9	91.9	27.2
2000	99.9	95.9	49.1
2020	99.9	98.8	54.4

Table B2.  
Number of schools by type

Year	Elementary	Junior High	High School	University
1873	12,558	-	-	-
1900	26,922	-	218	2
1935	25,875	-	557	45
1950	26,359	13,272	4,292	201
1975	24,892	10,928	4,933	420
2000	23,861	11,209	5,478	649
2020	19,525	10,222	4,874	795

## Appendix C: Key educational policies and documents

Table C1.  
Analysis of major educational policy documents

Document	Year	Key principles	Significance
Imperial Rescript on Education	1890	1. Loyalty to emperor 2. Filial piety 3. National morality	Established ideological foundation for pre-war education
Fundamental Law of Education	1947	1. Individual dignity 2. Academic freedom 3. Equal opportunity	Provided framework for democratic education
Basic Act on Education (revised)	2006	1. Traditional values 2. Patriotism 3. Global awareness	Updated educational principles for 21st century



**Appendix D: Glossary of terms**

Term	Japanese	Definition	Historical Context
Gakusei	学制	Education System Order	First modern educational framework
Kokutai	国体	National polity	Concept of Japan's unique national essence
Yutori Kyoiku	ゆとり教育	Relaxed education	Educational reform of the 1980s-90s
Rinkyoshin	臨教審	National Council on Educational Reform	Advisory body established in 1984