

What were the Underlying Factors that enabled the Rapid Development of Education in Modern Japan?

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Japan had almost established a self-sufficient and full-fledged national system of education by 1920 or in about fifty years from the introduction of modern education on the basis of models taken over from Western countries. It was an unparalleled undertaking in the world. What factors made it possible for modern education to develop so rapidly within a short space of time? Here I think through again this fundamental question. The following factors would be especially noteworthy. (1) cultural and educational legacy of the pre-modern Edo era, (2) secular tradition of education and escaping from conflict between religion and education, (3) linguistic uniformity in education, (4) no experience of any colonial system of education and the possibility of choosing from a wide diversity of foreign models, (5) firm belief on the idea of nation-building and national unity through education, (6) early emergence of the academic-credential society, and (7) consequences of the two external wars for education.

Japan was fortunate enough to be blessed with socio-cultural environmental factors that were favorable for the development of education. There was a growing consensus among political leaders of Meiji restoration on the pressing need of forming modern nation-state and national unity through a nation-wide “common” education. In the early period of the nation-building, the advent of the academic-credential society in which employment and social status of people were decided mainly on the basis of a person’s educational attainment had been laid. Such system of linking educational credentials with personal promotion aroused an education fever among ambitious young persons. At last, the early experience of two external wars brought a deeper understanding among Japanese people on the meaning and importance of the national education. The rapid development of Japanese education would have been achieved in a rather unique condition that was missing in most of the developing countries in the world.