

# A Comparison of Japanese and American Education Systems: Part 2

by Jackie Cooke, Gresham Barlow School District, Gresham, Oregon

## Information on the Life of a Teacher

There are important differences between Japanese and American teachers and administrators. High salaries, relatively high prestige, and very low birth rates make teaching jobs quite difficult to obtain in Japan while in the United States there are increasing teacher shortages. In 1992, there were 935,000 teachers employed in over 40,000 national and public elementary, lower secondary, upper secondary, and special education schools. About 60 percent of all teachers in Japan are male, with females holding the majority of positions in elementary schools. The average age of teachers in Japan is roughly 40 years, and the average years of experience is approximately 15. Teachers at member-level schools are employees of the national government. While more Japanese schools are acquiring specialists such as special education teachers and counselors, American schools have many more special subjects and support personnel than is the case in Japan. The typical Japanese school has only two administrators: a principal and a head teacher. At the school I visited, I was introduced to the Principal and another person who was called the Assistant Principal. (He may have been the head teacher but that was not the title he was given in the introductions.)

## Teacher Training

Certification requirements for teaching in the United States allow each state to establish its own requirements. Japan sets national standards. The trend in certification in both countries has been toward requiring more complete training, with practice teaching and extensive graduate work for specialized positions. Teachers may receive their preservice training at any university or junior college with a teacher-training course approved by Monbu-Kagaku-sho (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology — Monbusho, for short). Approximately 75 percent of all junior colleges, universities, and graduate schools have approved certification courses for teacher training. In addition to junior colleges and universities, there is one member-level teacher training university in each prefecture. Monbusho standards specify the number of credit hours required in subject specialty courses and pedagogy courses. Generally, more courses are required in peda-

gogy for those intending to teach the lower grade levels, whereas those intending to teach the upper grade levels are required to take most of their courses in their subject specialty. In addition to academic course work, teacher education programs require a practicum. People wishing to become elementary school teachers spend at least four weeks in a teaching practice situation and those intending to become lower and upper secondary school teachers spend at least two weeks. The practicum is usually preceded and followed by a total of 15 – 30 hours (one credit) of related instruction. The national teacher training universities have model schools attached to them for the purpose of teacher training. In other cases, the institution makes special arrangements with the prospective teacher's alma mater or other cooperating school.

One major difference in teacher training in Japan is the “Training Year.” In 1988, the Japanese National Ministry of Education and Science introduced a new program of teacher induction for newly appointed teachers. It applied to all those in their first assignments as full-time teachers — in national and public elementary schools, lower and upper secondary schools, and schools for the disabled. This program was mandated and financially authorized through a revision in Japanese education law. Phased in over four years beginning in 1989, the program requires all newly appointed teachers to participate. As a result, all new teachers now spend at least 90 days of their first year in activities directly linked to teacher induction. In addition to



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this high number of training days, another significant aspect of the first-year experience is the amount of support the new teachers receive, both formally and informally, from guidance teachers and other instructional staff members. Although in place for only a few years,



Teachers Working Collaboratively in Yagura Staff Room

the program is well received by teachers, school principals, and other educators and policy makers. They believe it accelerates and systematizes the acquisition of knowledge and skills that in previous years had to be gained on a much more informal, and sometimes haphazard, basis.

### Teaching Responsibilities

Many teachers also have responsibility as supervisors of school clubs, such as sports teams or the school band. This responsibility is heaviest at the lower secondary school level, where almost all teachers are associated with a particular student club. In addition to their responsibilities to their classes and clubs, teachers have many responsibilities as members of the school faculty. Most importantly, the teachers teaching the same grade level work together daily. Teachers' rooms in Japanese schools are designed to facilitate collaboration. Typically, all teachers sit together in one large room with their desks grouped by grade level. The principal at Yagura had his own office but chose to sit in the front of the common room, also. The assistant principal sat

to his left. In most schools, the day begins with a meeting of all the staff where the day's schedule and major events are announced. Teachers then may have the opportunity to meet within their grade level groups for a few minutes and discuss particular concerns. Longer sessions are often scheduled at other times throughout the week to discuss the study plan for the next week and discuss any issues which have arisen in the classrooms.

To accommodate these duties, teachers in Japan have fewer contact hours per week (15) than teachers in the United States. For example, I have approximately 24 contact hours a week. In contrast, in Japan a teacher's day is more balanced between teaching students and working with other adults to improve their teaching and the school's program. Teachers also collaborate

with the group of teachers teaching the same academic subject. They, too, will sometimes hold planning and discussion sessions, and may have responsibility for coordinating certain events, such as a model demonstration class that will be observed by other teachers or supervisors from outside the school.

Due to a personal interest, I interviewed Miyako Terhune on the topic of *Jugyuu Kenkyuu*: Japanese Lesson Study. She confirmed that her staff was in the middle of a Lesson Study cycle, which would conclude with a Lesson Study Open House, scheduled for October of 2004. The process consisted of teachers selecting an overarching goal, then looking at their particular group of students to assess needs as a means for determining the content of the particular "study lessons." Currently, members of the staff were spending time collaboratively creating two detailed lesson plans. They had not yet reached the point where they were ready to observe a participant teach the lesson to students. Both lessons focused on music content, because that is what Yagura is known for. According to Mrs. Terhune, schools in other parts of Japan have their own

content level specialties. Yagura will present their two lessons this fall in an open forum that will be attended by teachers from ten other schools in Kyoto Prefecture. Many lesson studies are published and available at Japanese Bookstores.

Teachers in Japan, like those in the United States, spend long hours at the school building or home to accomplish their job. It is not unusual for school teachers in either country to be at the school building between 60 and 70 hours per week. For instance, one writer describes an average teacher's day beginning at 7:30 a.m. and lasting until at least six in the evening. Traditionally in Japan, with these responsibilities comes a relatively high degree of respect in the eyes of the community. Japanese teachers are well respected when compared to teachers in our country. It was fun being introduced as a teacher in Japan. Back home the common response I get when I tell someone I'm a teacher is something like, "That must be a difficult job!" or the speaker starts complaining about the amount of money spent and the poor quality education our students get.

One place where I noticed an unexpected similarity, was that when I asked several of the native Japanese that I interviewed about their school mathematics experiences, I got the same response that I get so often back home in the United States. "Mathematics! I hate it. I'm not very good at it. I don't have the ability to do mathematics." In a society known for its quality mathematics instruction and accomplished students, I had hoped to find a difference in attitudes towards math. I was remind-

ed of this quote from *Making Sense: Teaching and Learning Mathematics with Understanding*, by James Hiebert, et al:

"It is only recently that we (in the USA) have moved from thinking of mathematics as an elite subject, to one that is essential for all citizens. Finally, it is common in the United States for people to accept the ability argument, thus excusing many for not learning mathematics."



Miyako Terhune and I co-teaching a Music Lesson

Obviously there is much work that still needs to be done to improve the public perceptions of mathematics in both cultures. ■