

A Comparison of Japanese and American Education Systems

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Part 1

In June I had a marvelous opportunity to travel to Japan, as a participant in an exchange program sponsored by Mt. Hood Community College, and as a guest of Ryukoku University in Otsu City, a suburb of Kyoto. I lived in a dorm and attended classes at the University for three weeks to study the language and culture of Japan. During this trip, I was also lucky enough to visit an elementary school, Yagura Shogakou, as the guest of Miyoko Terhune, a Japanese Special Education teacher. The apparent similarities and differences I saw at the school intrigued me. Therefore, I decided to do research and conduct more interviews in order to make comparisons between the Japanese and American educational systems. It is hoped that those who read this article will become more knowledgeable of teaching and learning in Japan and gain insights about a different culture which may then make the reader better able to clearly think about our own educational system.



General K-12 Information

Even though the Japanese adopted the American 6-3-3 model during the U.S. Occupation after World War II, elementary and secondary education is much more centralized than in the United States. Kindergartens are generally private in Japan. Elementary school is grades 1 – 6. Middle School is for grades 7 – 9, and grades 10 – 12 attend high school. Education is compulsory through the ninth grade. Many American public high schools are comprehensive. While there are a few comprehensive high schools in Japan, they are not popular. Between 75 and 80 percent of all Japanese students enroll in university preparation tracks. Most university-bound students attend separate academic high schools while students who definitely do not plan to go on with higher education, attend separate commercial or industrial high schools. In the United States, students enter secondary schools based on either school district assignment or personal choice. In Japan, the overwhelming majority of students are admitted to both high schools and university programs based upon entrance examination performance. The best Japanese high schools and universities are public schools that require high entrance examination scores. Since many Japanese employers continue to base hiring decisions upon the prestige level of the educational institution one attended, ambitious students attend private cram schools, or *juku*, and study long hours for both high school and university entrance examinations. The futures of most Japanese high school students depend largely upon the high school they attended and their college entrance examination scores.

A Greeting for Me

School calendar

For most elementary, junior high, and high schools, the school year in Japan begins on April 1 and is divided into three terms: April to July, September to

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December, and January to March. Some schools follow a two-term schedule. The gradual transition from a six-day school week to a five-day week was completed in 2002. Although school is no longer compulsory on Saturdays, many students choose to attend special study classes, sports events, etc. on the weekends.

The buses and trains were filled with students in their school uniforms. While traveling on a train one weekend I interviewed a middle school

student anxious to practice English. (Virtually every Japanese student takes English language courses from the seventh grade through the final year of high school.) I was told that the only way students could gain access to their schools was to wear their school uniforms. Japanese students spend at least six weeks longer in school each year than their American counterparts since summer vacations in Japan last only half the time of most summer breaks in the U.S. This doesn't count any of the after-school or weekend activities the student might be engaged in either.

School course guidelines

Japan has a national curriculum. The Ministry of Education and Science (Monbu-Kagaku-sho) prepares guidelines containing basic outlines of each subject taught in Japanese schools and the objectives and content of teaching for each grade. Revised every 10 years or so, these guidelines are followed by schools nationwide. This is much different than the standards implemented in a state-by-state

fashion in the U.S. While the Japanese K-12 curriculum is actually quite similar in many respects to the curriculum of U.S. schools, there are important differences. With regards to overall training, Japanese teachers at all levels are better prepared in mathematics than their American counterparts, especially at the elementary level.

I was able to look in on a mathematics class at Yagura. The 36 first graders in their third month of school were diligently working at their desks. (Remember there's no kindergarten in Japan unless parents choose to send their child to a private kindergarten. On average, every class I visited had 35 to 40 students. I was told that at 40 they hire a new teacher.) I observed no hands-on materials, calculators, or computers present in this classroom. They seemed to be designing their own solutions to a story problem situation involving subtraction. The problem was written on the board. It went like this:

Subtraction
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"There are 10 balloons in total
 (Of them) Red balloons are 4
 Yellow balloons are (how many)?"



First Grade Math Lesson

One teacher was presenting the lesson while another was circulating around the room assisting students as they worked through the problem. In Japan, first graders are always taught by a pair of teachers.

The Japanese believe schools should not only teach academic skills, but good character traits as well. A small number of hours every year are devoted to moral education in the national curriculum. For example, while visiting Yagura, we were told that academic classes would soon be over and students would be cleaning their school building. Japanese students are constantly exhorted by teachers to practice widely admired societal traits such as putting forth intense effort on any task and responding to greetings from teachers in a lively manner. Many times while I was on field trips to visit famous sites, I observed student groups responding in unison with the phrase "Arigato gozaimashita!" and bowing as they thanked their tour guide.



Team Teacher Assisting Students work through Subtraction Lesson

School textbooks

All elementary, junior high, and high schools are obliged to use textbooks that have been evaluated and approved by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. The textbooks used in each public school district are chosen from among government-authorized candidates by the local board of education based on a review by the prefectural board of education. In Japan there are only two math textbooks to choose between at the elementary level. In the U.S., we have a 7-year state-by-state adoption cycle for each content area. Each state creates its own list of approved texts. There is also a process for deviating from a standard adoption, if a district so chooses.

Funding

Municipalities and private sources fund kindergartens, but national, prefectural, and local governments pay almost equal shares of educational costs for students in grades one through nine. Well over 90 percent of Japan's students attend public schools through the ninth grade, but over 25 percent of students go to private high schools. The percentage of national funding for high schools is quite low, with prefectures and municipalities assuming most of the costs for public high schools. In our country, the differences in funding for education within each state (and in some cases within each county) are too vast to examine in this article.

Educational Reform

Despite Japanese students' impressive performance when compared to their peers in other developed nations such as reported in the TIMSS study, there is widespread dissatisfaction on the part of many Japanese about the nation's educational system. Many Japanese believe that the examination system is too stressful, that the schools are too rigid and don't meet the needs of individual students, that contemporary students show little interest in studying, and that the educational system needs to produce more creative and flexible citizens for the twenty-first century. Also, large numbers of Japanese blame the schools for a perceived increase in child misbehavior, particularly in junior high school, and in student suicides. Many reforms in curriculum and amount of time spent at school are in the process of being implemented. In the elementary school I visited, students seemed much freer than I had expected. It was common for students to call out and get up to walk around the room. When I asked several native Japanese adults and college-aged students if this would have been unusual behavior when they attended elementary school, I was assured that it was. ■