EDUCATION IN JAPAN

by Connie Hokanson

Level: Upper elementary or junior high

Objectives:

1. The student will gain knowledge about the educational system in Japan.
2. The student will compare and contrast it to the system in the U.S.
3. The students will develop listening and recall skills.

Materials:

1. Description of Japanese education
2. Student worksheet

Time: One to two hours

Procedure:

1. Read the description of the Japanese educational system to the students.
2. Ask them to complete the comparison chart.
3. Discuss completed charts.
4. Use answers from the charts as a basis for debating the merits of the two systems.

Extension ideas:
An excellent introduction to the Japanese educational system is contained in Introduction to Japan: A Workbook by Linda Wojtan (Youth for Understanding, 1995). It includes useful charts and articles. Tune in Japan (Asia Society, 1995) shows contemporary elementary and junior high life in the video portion and is supported by well-designed lesson plans in the Teacher's Guide.

Japan Digests Daily Life in Japanese High Schools and Japanese Education from the National Clearinghouse for U.S.-Japan Studies are two-page digests that can provide additional background for both teachers and students. The Internet Guide Education and Student Life in Japan offers an annotated list of online articles and statistics as well as student-oriented Web sites for further exploration of the topic of Japanese education.

Source: Teaching about Japan: Lessons and Resources
Edited by Mary Hammond Bernson and Linda S. Wojtan

National Clearinghouse for U.S.-Japan Studies URL: http://www.indiana.edu/~japan/

Source: http://www.indiana.edu/~japan/LP/LS37.html
Today we are going to talk about education in Japan. I want you to listen carefully because when we are finished I will be asking you to list ways education is the same in Japan as in the United States and ways it is different.

Education is very important to the Japanese. Almost 100% of the people in Japan are able to read and write. The groupings within the educational system are very similar to ours with 1 to 3 years of preschool and kindergarten, 6 years of elementary, 3 years of junior or middle school, 3 years of high school, and 4 years of university. Elementary and middle school students usually attend neighborhood schools. Then tests determine what high school they will attend.

The Japanese school year begins on April 1 and ends on March 31 of the following year. There are three semesters: April to July, September to December, and January to March. There are 6 weeks of vacation in July and August, 2 weeks around the New Year, and 2 to 3 weeks in the spring after the annual exams. One major difference between Japanese and American schools is the length of the school year. Japanese children attend school on Saturday mornings, as well as Monday through Friday, and also have shorter vacations, so they attend school 240 to 250 days a year as opposed to our 180 days.

The school day for elementary children usually begins at 8:30 and ends at 3:00. During the course of the week the children will study Japanese language, social studies, math, science, music, art, home economics, physical education and moral education. Children in Japan enjoy recess just as American children do. Hot lunches are prepared in the school kitchen, but in most schools each class eats in its own room, not in a school lunchroom. The children take turns serving lunch to their classmates and they also help clean their classrooms at the end of the day. In many schools, the students wear uniforms and badges which tell their name, class, and school.

Classes in Japan may take trips to museums and historical sites. In older grades, these field trips can sometimes last as long as a week. The students often stay in traditional Japanese inns, where they will sleep on the floor on tatami mats and thin mattresses called futon.

Junior highs and high schools in Japan are similar to those in the United States. The students take many of the same classes as Americans do, and most of them study English from seventh grade through twelfth grade. High school students take difficult examinations in their senior year in order to get into the various universities. There is a great deal of competition and those who wish to continue their educations at good schools must study very hard. Many go to cram schools after their regular school day ends.

Now I am going to give you a chart on which I want you to list some of the similarities and differences you have picked out. When everyone is finished we will discuss your papers.
Comparison Chart of Japanese and U.S. Education
Student Worksheet

Name _______________________
Date_________

**Directions:** On the chart below fill in at least four things you learned about Japanese education that are similar to the way we do things in the United States. In the second column of the chart list at least four things which are different. When you finish the chart, please answer the questions at the bottom.

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<th>Similarities in Education System</th>
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1. What did you see or hear in the presentation that you would like to see added to the education system here in the United States

2. What did you see or hear that you wouldn't like?
Understanding the Japanese people and culture requires understanding the factors that mold them. Particularly important are those components which influence them in their formative years. The Japanese education system is one of the most influential agents molding Japanese youth. Given the large amount of time that Japanese students spend in schools, it is little wonder that the education system plays a tremendous role in determining the fabric of Japanese society. An examination of the "typical" high school experience illuminates the function of the education system in Japanese society.

Getting to School

Japanese high school students do not drive cars. Many either walk or ride bicycles if the distance is not too great. In other cases, students must take public buses and trains, often changing lines several times in order to reach their destinations. It is not uncommon for students to spend two or more hours each day on public transportation. After junior high school, students attend schools based on standardized high school entrance examination scores. As a result, some students travel a great distance to attend the school determined by their test scores. The school day begins at 8:30, so students may leave home as early as 6:30. While some students sleep or study during their long commute, public transportation also provides a chance for socializing with peers. Student behavior on the way to school is regulated by school policies. These policies may prohibit certain activities in public--chewing gum, consuming snacks, reading books while walking--anything that might reflect badly on the reputation of the school. Each school has a unique uniform that makes its students easily identifiable to the public. School policies often require students to stand on buses and trains, leaving seats open for other passengers in order to demonstrate consideration. In practice, however, the behavior of students tends to relax as they move farther away from school.

At School

Once at school, the students usually enter an area full of small lockers in which they place their street shoes and don school slippers. These slippers may be color coded: pink for girls and blue for boys. Many schools have a weekly school-wide assembly. Then students assemble in their homeroom classes for the day's studies. The school day starts with classroom management tasks, such as taking attendance and making announcements. These activities usually are conducted by the students themselves on a rotating duty schedule called toban. Each homeroom has an average of 40-45 students. Students stay in their homeroom classrooms for most of the school day while the teachers move from room to room, operating out of a central teachers' room. Only for physical education, laboratory classes, or other subjects requiring special facilities do students move to different parts of the school. Between classes and at lunch time, classrooms can be noisy, lively places. Some schools may have a cafeteria, but most do not. Even in schools where a lunch is prepared and provided to the students, they usually eat together in their homeroom classrooms. In most schools, students bring a box lunch from home, almost always consisting of foods prepared by the mother in the early morning hours, such s rice, fish, eggs, vegetables, and pickles.

Japanese students spend 240 days a year at school, 60 days more then their American counterparts. Although many of those days are spent preparing for annual school festivals and events such as Culture Day, Sports Day, and school excursions, Japanese students still spend considerably more time in class than American students. Traditionally, Japanese students have attended school for half a day on Saturdays; however, the number of required Saturdays each month is decreasing as the result of Japanese educational reforms. Course selection and textbooks are determined by the Japanese Ministry of Education. Schools have limited autonomy in their curriculum development. Students in academic high schools typically take three years each of the following subjects: mathematics, social studies, Japanese, science, and English. Other subjects include physical education, music, art, and moral studies. All the students in one grade level study the same subjects. Given the number of required subjects, electives are few.

At the end of the academic day, all students participate in o soji, the cleaning of the school. They sweep the classrooms and the hallways, empty trash cans, clean restrooms, clean chalkboards and chalk erasers, and pick up
trash from the school grounds. After o soji, school is dismissed and most students disperse to different parts of the school for club meetings.

**Extracurricular Activities**

Club activities take place after school every day. Teachers are assigned as sponsors, but often the students themselves determine the club's daily activities. Students can join only one club, and they rarely change clubs from year to year. In most schools, clubs can be divided into two types: sports clubs (baseball, soccer, judo, kendo, track, tennis, swimming, softball, volleyball, rugby) and culture clubs (English, broadcasting, calligraphy, science, mathematics, yearbook). New students usually are encouraged to select a club shortly after the school year begins in April. Clubs meet for two hours after school each day and many clubs continue to meet during school vacations. Club activities provide one of the primary opportunities for peer group socialization. Most college bound students withdraw from club activities during their senior year to devote more time to preparation for university entrance examinations. Although visible in the general high school experience, it is in the clubs that the fundamental relationships of senpai (senior) and kohai (junior) are established most solidly. It is the responsibility of the senpai to teach, initiate, and take care of the kohai. It is the duty of the kohai to serve and defer to the senpai. For example, kohai students in the tennis club might spend one year chasing tennis balls while the upperclassmen practice. Only after the upperclassmen have finished may the underclassmen use the courts. The kohai are expected to serve their senpai and to learn from them by observing and modeling their behavior. This fundamental relationship can be seen throughout Japanese society, in business, politics, and social dealings.

"Cram Schools"

An interesting component of Japanese education is the thriving industry of juku and yobiko, after school "cram schools," where approximately 60% of Japanese high school students go for supplemental lessons. Juku may offer lessons in nonacademic subjects such as art, swimming, abacus, and calligraphy, especially for elementary school students, as well as the academic subjects that are important to preparation for entrance examinations at all levels. Juku for high school students must compete for enrollment with yobiko, which exist solely to prepare students for university entrance examinations. Some "cram schools" specialize in preparing students for the examination of a particular school. Although it would seem natural for students to dread the rigor of additional lessons that extend their school day well into the late evening hours and require additional homework, many students enjoy juku and yobiko, where teachers often are more animated and more interesting than some of the teachers in their regular schools. Also, in many cases, the lessons studied in "cram schools" provide an intellectual challenge for students bored with the standardized curriculum of their regular schools.

Juku and yobiko are primarily private, for profit schools that attract students from a wide geographical area. They often are located near train stations, enabling students to transport themselves easily to juku directly from school. Juku and yobiko thrive in Japan, where it is believed that all people possess the same innate intellectual capacity, and it is only the effort of individuals, or lack thereof, that determines their achievement above or below their fellows. In Japanese schools, there is the tendency to pass students with their grade cohort. Therefore, without the supplemental juku lessons, some students could fall well behind their classmates. Yobiko also exist to serve ronin, "masterless samurai," students who have failed an entrance examination, but who want to try again. It is possible for students to spend a year or two as ronin after graduating from high school, studying at yobiko until they can pass a university entrance examination or until they give up. "Cram school" tuition is expensive, but most parents are eager to pay in order to ensure acceptance into a selective junior high school, high school, or university, and thus, a good future for their children.

**Entrance Examinations**

In addition to university admission, entrance to high school also is determined by examination, and the subjects tested are Japanese, mathematics, science, social studies, and English. Private high schools create their own examinations, while those for public high schools are standardized within each prefecture. Students (and their parents) consider each school's college placement record when deciding which examinations to take. Success or failure on an entrance examination can influence a student's entire future, since the prospect of finding a good job depends on the school attended. Thus, students experience the pressure of this examination system at a relatively early age. But, practice tests at school and juku help teachers to direct students toward institutions whose examinations they are most likely to pass.
Free Time

Japanese students devote approximately two hours per weekday to homework, and about three hours on Sunday. They spend an average of two hours per day watching television, half an hour listening to the radio, an hour reading casually, and less than half an hour in social relations with peers outside of school. Japanese adults tend to perceive high school students in many ways as large children instead of young adults. And, while opposite sexes are interested in each other, parents and teachers strongly discourage teenage dating. Most young people do not begin to date until after high school. Finally, for a variety of reasons, there are few drug problems among Japanese adolescents.

Questions for Consideration

1. What fundamental social values are reflected in the education systems of the United States and Japan?
2. What are the intrinsic and extrinsic incentives motivating American and Japanese students?
3. Imagine high school life without cars. How would it be different?
4. There are different definitions of democracy as applied to education. In the United States, recognition of different talents = democracy. In Japan, "equal access" based on standardized scores = democracy. What do you think?

References and Resources


Rohlen, Thomas P. JAPAN'S HIGH SCHOOLS. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983. ED 237 343


Japanese Education  
Lucien Ellington  
Updated September 2005  

http://www.indiana.edu/~japan/digest5.html

It is important for teachers and students to develop a broad understanding of Japanese education. Americans who are knowledgeable of teaching and learning in Japan gain insights about a different culture and are better able to clearly think about their own educational system. This Digest is an introductory overview of 1) Japanese educational achievements, 2) Japanese K-12 education, 3) Japanese higher education, 4) contemporary educational issues, and 5) significant U.-Japan comparative education topics.

Japanese Educational Achievements. Japan's greatest educational achievement is the high-quality basic education most young people receive by the time they complete high school. Although scores have slightly declined in recent years, Japanese students consistently rank among world leaders in international mathematics tests. Recent statistics indicate that well over 95 percent of Japanese are literate, which is particularly impressive since the Japanese language is one of the world's most difficult languages to read and write. Currently over 95 percent of Japanese high school students graduate compared to 89 percent of American students. Some Japanese education specialists estimate that the average Japanese high school graduate has attained about the same level of education as the average American after two years of college. Comparable percentages of Japanese and American high school graduates now go on to some type of post-secondary institution.

Japanese K-12 Education. 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 more centralized than in the United States. Control over curriculum rests largely with the national Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (Monbukagakusho) and education is compulsory through the ninth grade. 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. Almost 90 percent of students attend public schools through the ninth grade, but over 29 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. High salaries, relatively high prestige, and low birth rates make teaching jobs quite difficult to obtain in Japan while in the United States there are teacher shortages in certain fields. Although 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. Japanese schools have only two or three administrators, one of whom has some teaching responsibilities.

Japanese students spend at least six weeks longer in school each year than their American counterparts although Japan's school year was recently shortened when all required half-day Saturday public school attendance ended in 2002.

While the Japanese K-12 curriculum is actually quite similar in many respects to the curriculum of U.S. schools, there are important differences. Because Japanese teachers at all levels are better prepared in mathematics than their American counterparts, instruction in that subject is more sophisticated in Japan. Japanese language instruction receives more attention in Japanese schools than English instruction in the United States because of the difficulty of learning written Japanese. Virtually every Japanese student takes English language courses from the seventh grade through the final year of high school.

Since many Japan Digest readers are social studies teachers, a few words about those subjects are included here. First- and second-grade students study social studies in an integrated science/social studies course. In grades 3-12, there are separate civics, geography, Japanese and world history, sociology, and politics-economics courses. University-bound students may elect to take more or less social studies electives depending upon their career interests.

All Japanese texts are written and produced in the private sector; however, the texts must be approved by the Ministry of Education. Textbook content, length, and classroom utilization in Japan is quite different than in the United States. The content of Japanese textbooks is based upon the national curriculum, while most American texts
tend to cover a wider array of topics. Japanese textbooks typically contain about half the pages of their American counterparts. Consequently, unlike many American teachers, almost all Japanese teachers finish their textbooks in an academic year.

The Japanese believe schools should teach not only academic skills but good character traits as well. While a small amount of hours every year is devoted to moral education in the national curriculum, there is substantial anecdotal evidence that teachers do not take the instructional time too seriously and often use it for other purposes. Still, Japanese teachers endeavor to inculcate good character traits in students through the hidden curriculum. For example, all Japanese students and teachers clean school buildings every week. 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 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 on 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 almost all students are admitted to high school based upon entrance examination performance. Since entering a high-ranked high school increases a student's chance of university admission or of obtaining a good job after high school graduation, over half of Japanese junior high students attend private cram schools, or juku, to supplement their examination preparations. Until recently examination performance was the major criterion for university entrance as well. However many private colleges and universities have replaced entrance examinations with other methods for determining admission, including interviews. Although mid- and high-level universities still rely primarily on entrance examination scores, increasing numbers of college-bound students do not spend enormous amounts of hours studying for university examinations as was the case until just a few years ago.

**Japanese Higher Education.** Japan, with almost three million men and women enrolled in over 700 universities and four-year colleges, has the second largest higher educational system in the developed world. In Japan, public universities usually enjoy more prestige than their private counterparts and only about 27 percent of all university-bound students manage to gain admission to public universities. Even so, Japanese universities are considered to be the weakest component in the nation's educational system. Many Japanese students have traditionally considered their university time to be more social than academic and, usually, professors demand relatively little of their charges. Until recently, graduate education in Japan was underdeveloped compared to Europe and the United States. However in response to increased demands for graduate education because of globalization, Japanese graduate enrollments have increased by approximately one third since the mid-1990s.

**Contemporary Educational Issues.** In the past decade a variety of factors have contributed both to changes in Japanese schools and to increasing controversy about education. Japanese annual birth rates have been decreasing for almost two decades, and Japan's current population of almost 128 million is expected to decline. Almost half of all Japanese women with children in school now work outside the home at some point during their children's schooling. Although low compared to the U.S., Japan's divorce rates have been rising recently. While Japanese teachers now enjoy considerably smaller classes than at any time in the past, they face increasing discipline problems resulting in part from children who do not get adequate parental attention. Also Japan's economy has experienced a fifteen-year malaise, and many people believe that an inflexible educational system is in part responsible for the country's economic problems.

In 2002 the Ministry of Education began to implement educational reforms that officials labeled the most significant since the end of World War II. In an attempt to stimulate students to be independent and self-directed learners, one third of the content of the national curriculum was eliminated. Japanese students in grades 3-9 are now required to take Integrated Studies classes in which they and their teachers jointly plan projects, field trips, and other "hands-on" activities. Students in Integrated Studies learn about their local environment, history, and economy. They also engage in regular interactions with foreigners, and in learning conversational English. There are no Integrated Studies textbooks, and teachers are not allowed to give tests on what students have learned. Although many elementary school teachers and students seem to enjoy Integrated Studies, the reform is quite controversial among both the public and junior high school educators. They perceive Integrated Studies as "dumbing down" the national curriculum, and they are concerned that the reform will result in less-educated students and lower high school
entrance examination performance. In response to this controversy, the Ministry of Education has recently announced plans to reevaluate Integrated Studies.

Japanese higher education is also currently going through significant changes. During the early part of the 21st century, the Japanese government initiated policies intended to expand educational opportunities in professions such as business and law. In 2004 the Japanese government declared the national universities to be "independent administrative entities," with the goal of creating more autonomous universities offering less duplication of programs while having more financial discretion. It is expected that some national universities will attain international reputations as research centers. It is quite likely that the recent reforms will also result in downsizing of some public universities and expansion of other public institutions of higher learning. Because of projected smaller enrollments in a few years due to continuing birth rate declines, many of Japan's private universities are potential "endangered species."

The way certain Japanese textbooks depict World War II has twice been the subject of international controversy in the new century. In 2001 the Ministry of Education approved a new junior high school textbook, written and edited by a group of nationalist academics, that omitted topics such as the Japanese army's mistreatment of women in battle zones and areas under Japanese rule and the Nanjing Massacre (Masalski 2001). In Spring 2005 the Ministry approved a new edition of the same textbook. In both instances, despite the fact that less than 1% of all Japanese students use the book in schools, there were widespread Chinese and Korean protests. In 2005 the situation negatively affected overall Chinese-Japanese relations, as boycotts of Japanese goods occurred and some Japanese-owned property was destroyed in China.

**Significant Comparative Education Topics.** Despite the problems addressed in this *Digest*, American policymakers and educators will find Japan's educational system, and in particular its K-12 schools, worthy of serious study. Scholars of Japanese education are particularly interested in the following questions: Why are Japanese elementary teachers so much more successful than their American counterparts in teaching math? How have Japanese educators managed to sustain successful peer collaboration for decades? How is moral education handled in Japan, and can American textbooks be improved through a closer examination of slimmer and more focused Japanese texts? In an era of increasing globalization, it is imperative that American educators study other nations' schools. Japan offers rich food for thought for all those who wish to improve the teaching profession.

**REFERENCES**


**Bibliography**


Articles and Essays

Monbukagakusho  [http://www.mext.go.jp/english/]

Part of the National Clearinghouse for U.S.-Japan Studies’ online publications. Describes the “typical” high school experience and the function of the educational system. Includes narratives on: “Getting to School,” “At School, Extracurricular Activities,” “Cram Schools,” “Entrance Examinations,” and “Free Time.” Also includes some questions for consideration, resources, and references.

Japanese Education (Japan Digest)  [http://www.indiana.edu/~japan/digest5.html]
Part of the National Clearinghouse for U.S.-Japan Studies’ online publications. Presents an overview of the Japanese educational system. The digest provides information on: “Japanese Educational Achievements,” “Japanese K-12 Education,” “Japanese Higher Education,” “Education in the Workplace and for Personal Growth,” and “Problems and Future Perspectives for Education in Japan.”

Elementary School in Japan  [http://web-japan.org/nipponia/nipponia16/special.html]
A five article special feature on elementary school in Japan from the quarterly magazine Nipponia. "Japan's Elementary School System—100 Years Old" provides a history of Japan's modern education system. "A Year in the Life of Students at Kamei Elementary School" is a photo essay that offers an idea of student life in Japan. "A Day in the Life of an Elementary School Student" is another photo essay of a typical day. "Elementary School Education in Japan—A Statistical Overview" displays various statistics. "Unique Schools" describes new innovations in teaching and class organization. Japanese translation of text is also provided.
Sites for Students

Schools  http://web-japan.org/kidsweb/japan/schools.html
Part of Kids Web Japan. Presents a description of the elementary school experience of Japanese children. Provides photos and a Q and A section. Questions include: “What sorts of games do elementary school students play during recess?” “What are school lunches like?” “What kinds of homework do students do?” “How long do they study each day?” “When are school vacations?” and “How do kids get to and from school?”

A Day in the Life of Kentaro  http://www.tjf.or.jp/index_e.html
From The Japan Forum. Pictures and text describe all aspects of the daily life of an elementary school student from breakfast to bed. Peek into a student’s backpack in the “Tookoo” section, learn about class schedules, explore what students do after school, and much more.

The Way We Are http://www.tjf.or.jp/thewayweare/index.html
Another site from The Japan Forum. This time, the results of a photo contest are used to describe the daily life and personalities of high school students in Japan. “Let’s Make Friends” introduces the photographers, “Daily Life” provides photos and commentary on a variety of subjects, “Data” lists information about the participants, and “Glossary” defines Japanese words used on the site. There is also a message board where students can connect with Japanese high school students as well as an opportunity for students outside of Japan to add their own photos to the site.

A Day in the Life of a Japanese Student
http://cpsed.net/glenhill/classrooms/itinerants/mcaulay/fulbright/index.html
"After visiting Japan as part of a Fulbright Memorial Fund Scholarship Award, Dr. Dianne McAulay wanted to depict a day in the life of a Japanese student. In this way, American students could increase their understanding of Japanese life. A sixth grade class at Kashiwazaki City's Kenno Elementary School agreed to help by creating drawings, complete with explanations. The exquisite and precise drawings shown below are the result." This site offers a series of 25 drawings and accompanying text.

Statistics