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The Newsletter of FPRI's Wachman Center

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Beyond the Rhetoric: Essential Questions About Japanese Education

by Lucien Ellington

December 2003
Vol. 8, No. 7

Lucien Ellington, a senior fellow of the Foreign Policy Research Institute's **Marvin Wachman Fund for International Education**, is UC Foundation Professor of Education and Co-director of the Asia Program at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. He is also editor of "Education about Asia." This essay is drawn from his presentation at our 2003 **History Institute on "Teaching Japan."** The conference papers by George R. Packard on "Another Look at the Occupation of Japan" and Anne Imamura on "The Japanese Family Faces Twenty-First Century Challenges" appear in the Fall 2003 issue of "Education about Asia." Other papers from the conference are posted on www.fpri.org. We are grateful to the Center for Global Partnership and the Freeman Foundation for their support of the History Institute on Japan.

Over the past two decades, Americans have been preoccupied by Japan's schools. Often the rhetoric has prevented educators and policymakers who seek a clearer understanding of Japanese education from acquiring objective information. Here, I attempt to separate myth from fact, in order to focus attention on the important questions concerned Americans should be asking about Japanese schools.

Japan's Educational System: an Overview

Even before the 1868 Meiji Restoration that marked the beginning of Japan's modern period, the Japanese were well educated by the standards of the time. In 1839 it had at least 300 private academies and approximately 3,000 *terakoya*, or temple schools. By the early nineteenth century Japanese literacy rates were comparable to those in the UK and the U.S. The Meiji oligarchs established Japan's first national public school system in the early 1870s, creating centrally controlled schools where ordinary students would receive basic education while exceptional students could proceed to higher education and important positions in government and business.

The American Occupation of Japan constituted a major reform period in Japanese education. Opportunities for secondary and higher education were vastly expanded, and Japan adopted an American-style system of six years of elementary school, three of junior high, and three of high school. The contemporary Japanese educational system produces higher literacy and high school graduation rates than does the United States' system, while enabling about the same percentage of Japanese as Americans to receive some form of post-secondary education.

Despite these achievements, Japan is currently immersed in major educational reform largely due to a societal perception that schools are not adequately preparing students for the twenty-first century's economy and society. The school week has been reduced to five days, and roughly one-third of the national curriculum has been eliminated. Elementary and middle-school students are now devoting a portion of their day to "Integrated Studies," where they, along with teachers, theoretically decide what will be studied. These reforms have been highly controversial.

The Politicization of Comparative Education in the U.S.

One of the reasons discussions of Japanese education in the U.S. often generate more heat than light is that, historically, the entire subject of comparative education tends to be controversial here. Comparativist scholar Gerald Letendre makes the case that historically; Americans have only become interested in schooling in another country when the particular nation is perceived as a threat. In the late nineteenth century German universities received extensive

American scrutiny, in part because many Americans viewed Germany's science and technology as superior to the United States'. In the 1950s many Americans paid particular attention to Soviet math and science education in view of Sputnik and the Cold War. Japanese education became a hot topic in the 1980s, when a large number of Americans perceived Japan as an economic threat. In all three cases, the focus was not objective comparative education but the question, "Who is winning?"

In the case of Japan, American conservatives and liberals had contrasting perceptions. The former perceived Japanese education as producing well-behaved, high-achieving students. The latter saw Japan's schools as impaired by excessive competition, which caused students to be unhappy and often suicidal. Media on both sides of the Pacific made it harder to understand Japan's schools through reports that were often inaccurate and distorted. Today, Japan is no longer considered a threat, and its schools are seldom discussed in the media. However, in the American educational K-12 establishment, myths about Japanese education abound.

The Myths About Japan's Schools

Most writers on Japanese schools in such prominent education publications as the Kappan and Educational Leadership are not Japan specialists. They tend to be either members of the cottage industry that defends public education against all comers or teachers/administrators who visited Japan once and immediately became experts. They cite as sources not scholarly journals but American newspapers and journals of opinion, or English-language translations of the same kind of Japanese sources.

The general goal of those who write about Japanese schools for largely American teacher audiences seems to be to defend our schools by attacking Japanese education. A corollary perception of American educationists who write about Japan is that the political right in this country has used Japan's schools to bash our own. There is some basis for truth in this, since too often conservatives have overlooked problems that concern Japanese (such as the seeming inability of Japan's schools to foster creativity). Still, pieces on Japan's schools that appear in American K-12 education journals are notorious for misinformation.

Catherine Lewis has identified two general myths about Japanese education that seem to constitute the foundation of a host of other more specific incorrect assumptions held by many American educators: (l) it is said to cause psychosocial problems such as suicide and violence; and (2) Japanese teachers focus exclusively upon students' academic achievement, to the exclusion of anything else.

A possible foundation of the first myth is the sensational treatment by Japanese media of any school violence incidents. The second seems to flow from the assumption on the part of many American educators that if Japanese education emphases learning basic academic content, then there must be less focus on the whole child. Specifically, the first myth gives rise to the pervasive but erroneous belief that a larger percentage of Japanese adolescents commits suicide than their American counterparts. Although neither country has a notably serious adolescent suicide problem, U.S. per capita figures are in fact significantly higher for boys than is the case in Japan, and only slightly lower for girls. Combining the figures for males and females, American teens overall commit suicide more often than Japanese teens.

Moreover, when daily life in elementary and secondary schools is examined, the notion that Japanese only care about academics is not borne out. Kindergarten and early elementary education is more academic in the U.S. than in Japan. Art and music are a much more integral part of Japan's elementary and junior high curriculum than in the United States, where such subjects are often viewed as frills. Japanese students and teachers take extracurricular activities quite seriously at all levels of education. Japanese junior high teachers spend a larger percentage of their work time on non-academic activities such as club sponsorship and counseling students than American teachers do. And while Japan does have gateway examinations that are important for students who intend to enter high school and university, only the small percentage of Japanese students who aspire to attend the nation's most elite universities devote what could be considered excessive time to examination preparation.

Another myth about Japanese education that many Americans unquestioningly accept is that Japan has a rigid, top-down educational system. This error is largely rooted in our (by world standards) exceptionally decentralized educational system. With 15,000 school districts and 50 state departments of education, any centrally directed system looks "rigid" to us. Of course, the Japanese educational system—its middle-level bureaucrats in particular—wield

considerable power. However, the Japanese national curriculum is characterized by general, not specific, standards and benchmarks. Also, as scholars such as Hiroshi Azuma, Gary DeCoker, Gerald Letendre, and Leonard Schoppa have observed, several powerful groups influence the course of Japanese education other than the Ministry of Education, including parents, teachers, prefectural education officials, the cram-school industry, and (albeit less so than in previous decades), the national teachers' union.

Transcending the Rhetoric

Policymakers and educators, if they set aside much of the rhetoric surrounding the subject and delve into comparative education scholarship, can learn much about Japanese education that may be applicable to U.S. schools. The questions that follow represent only a sample of what we may be able to learn from the already available English-language sources about Japanese schools.

Why are Japanese elementary teachers so successful in teaching the subject of math to young children? Japan consistently ranks among world leaders in student math performance. The U.S. is consistently below average. The beginnings of the answer to this question are better understood through an examination of the level in which mathematics instruction begins.

How do Japanese teachers collaboratively foster professional development? In the United States there is much discussion among educationists on how to promote teacher collaboration. Collaborative teacher networks are numerous in Japan, and American administrators who are responsible for planning such projects should profit from learning more about these networks.

How do Japanese teachers balance academic and non-academic professional work assignments? One comparative study of American and Japanese teachers' work days indicated that American teachers spent less time at school than their Japanese peers, but much more time in actual teaching.

Why are Japanese textbooks so light and American textbooks so heavy? The textbook continues to be the primary instructional tool utilized by most teachers. There are radical differences in the sizes and narratives of Japanese and American textbooks and in how teachers use them.

How is moral education handled in Japan? Increasing numbers of American school districts have established Character Education programs over the past decade. The Japanese introduced systematized Moral Education in public schools in the 1870s.

Are there lessons to be learned?