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The High-Achieving Educational System of Japan

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For many years, students from Japan have been among the highest-performing students in the world on international tests, particularly in mathematics and science. “Among OECD countries, Japan is now ranked second in mathematics performance and first in…science performance” (OECD, 2014c, p. 1). Recently, even the scores posted by Japanese students in two additional areas--reading and problem-solving--have improved to the extent that now they score among the highest in the world in reading and problem-solving (OCED, 2014a).

Similarly, on the 2011 administration of the TIMSS international mathematics test for fourth and eighth-gr- graders, Japanese students were among the top-performers, just below marks set by students from Singapore, Hong Kong, Korea, and Taipei (Mullis, Martin, Foy, & Arora, 2012). Perhaps one of the most remarkable aspects of Japanese success is that high performance is not the result of a few high achievers, but is distributed throughout the system. For example, in the most recent administration assessing problem-solving skills of 15-year-olds, PISA found that only 7% of Japanese students scored below level 2 on the assessment, compared to 18% of American students who scored below level 2 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). Twenty-two percent (22%) of Japanese 15-year-olds scored level 5 or above, whereas only 12% of American 15-year-olds scored level 5 or above.

As the Center on International Education Benchmarking (2014) notes, “As long as there have been international comparisons of national student achievement, Japan has placed at or near the top” (p. 1). Over the past decade, East Asian countries have consistently dominated international rankings, with Singapore and Korea typically in the lead, with Japan and China Taipei not far behind (Mullis, Martin, Foy, & Arora, 2012).

In terms of global competitiveness, The World Economic Forum ranked Japan 6th (Schwab, 2014, p. 13), and Cornell University ranked Japan 21st of 143 countries on the global innovation index (Cornell University, INSEAD, & WIPO, 2014, p. xxiv). Despite Despisuch lofty levels of achievement, many Japanese are highly critical of the nation’s educational policies. Fujita and Dawson (2007) comment, “Japanese schools and teachers, especially public schools and their teachers, have been under relentless attack from various stakeholders since the 1980s” (p. 50). Willis, Yamamura, and Rappleye (2008) note that criticisms over “lack of creativity and imagination, not to mention the dearth of Nobel prizes, a point of wounded national pride, has people seriously worried” (pp. 496-497). Even a recent report from OECD (2010) on the highest-achieving school systems in the world acknowledged the furor over the state of public education in Japan:

Over the last two decades, there has been a rising chorus of criticism about Japan’s education system, especially concerns over a deficit in encouraging creativity and innovation and whether Japan can maintain its top place in the

international league table of student achievement. Other concerns center on an apparent erosion of moral and group values. (p. 147)

Data on the attitudes of Japanese students indicate that they experience more anxiety, enjoy learning less, and have lower confidence in their abilities than students in other countries. In contrast, students in the United States are less anxious, enjoy learning more, have higher confidence in their abilities, but perform at lower levels (OECD, 2013).

Undoubtedly, one of the functions of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) is to inculcate in students the importance of exerting great individual effort for the betterment of the local community and the nation. A recent MEXT (2014c) document states:

Through the steadfast efforts of each and every individual citizen, education in Japan realizes the ideal of equal opportunity, raises the education standards of the nation, and responds to the needs of the times while making significant contributions to the development of society (p. 1).

Attitudes towards Education

When a student does not perform well in school in Japan, his or her failure is more than just an individual disappointment, but a blow to the stature of the entire family, especially the student’s mother. Conversely, when a student does well, he or she advances the family name and reputation. As a professor of sociology at Komazawa University in Tokyo, has noted, “The social status of parents is related to their child-rearing and child’s education” (Pasion, 2014, p. 1). In this way, academic success inextricably linked to “saving face.”

Perhaps as a result of the importance of performance in school, truancy in Japan is rare. Students in Japanese schools tend to be punctual and are unlikely to be disruptive. Most Japanese students reported that they listen to what the teacher says; 90% of Japanese students agree that noise or disorder never or rarely disrupts learning (OECD, 2009). Overall, Japan has the “best disciplinary climate…among students in all other OECD countries” and it continues to improve (OECD, 2013, p. 7). The remarkable compliance among students derives not only from pressure from parents, but also from the meticulous record-keeping of teachers. In Japan, a student’s record describes not only grade point average and academic performance, but also detailed comments on attendance, participation in extra-curricular activities, behavior, and attitude. At every level of schooling, schools require students to submit school reports as part of the admission process. Thus, a student who misbehaves, does not participate in extra-curricular activities, or exhibits poor manners significantly decreases his/her chances of getting into the better schools.

The Japanese constitution states that education is both a right and a duty. Children have the right to receive an education, and it is the parents/guardians who should provide the best education possible. Homeschooling does not exist in Japan, unless extreme circumstances require a child to be housebound.

Education is compulsory for grades 1-9 (Ellington, 2005), and public schools are free except for the cost of lunch or extracurricular activities, such as field trips. Municipalities and private sources pay for kindergarten, but national, prefectural (similar to a state or a province), and local governments pay almost equal shares of costs for students in grades 1-9.

Textbooks are free-of-charge as well. Interestingly, MEXT pledges to provide free textbooks to Japanese children, no matter where they might live. Thus, a Japanese family living in the United States could contact the nearest Japanese Embassy and request that textbooks be sent to them.

Early Childhood Education

Although compulsory education officially starts at age 6, children get introduced to schooling at a relatively young age. Seventy-seven percent (77%) of Japanese three-year-olds attend half-day kindergarten or go to childcare centers; 93% of four-year-olds attend kindergarten or childcare centers (OECD, 2013). Japanese kindergartens have distinctive programs with classes grouped according to the student’s age: 3-year-olds, 4-year-olds, and 5-year-olds. Kindergartens are regulated by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, and are inclined to be more concerned with academic preparation for elementary schools. Most students in MEXT-regulated kindergartens attend for only half of a day.

On the other hand, most childcare centers in Japan offer all-day programs and tend to focus on “general care.” The Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare monitors these centers. See Table 1 below for a comparison of kindergarten and childcare centers in Japan.

Table 1: Comparison of kindergarten and day-care centers (OECD, 2014b)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Variable | **Kindergarten** | **Childcare center** |
| Target | From age 3 to 6  (before entering primary school) | From age 0 to 6  (before entering primary school)  \* Children with needs for care (Eligibility determined by municipal governments) |
| Childcare  Time | 4 hours a day | 8 hours a day |
| Legal  Foundation | School Education Act | Child Welfare Act |
| Governing  Body | Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) | Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (MHLW) |
| Standards | National Curriculum Standards for Kindergartens | Day Care Guidelines |
| Number of  Children | 1,705,000 (2007)  　Public 338,000  　Private 1,368,000 | 2,015,000 (2007)  　Public　　945,000  　Private　1,071,000 |
| Number of  Facilities | 14,000 (2007)  　Public 5,500  　Private 8,500 | 23,000 (2007)  　Public　　12,000  　Private　　11,000 |

Parents usually apply to the local municipality for licensed childcare centers and pay 40% of the costs, while the government pays the remaining 60% (OECD, 2012a). Despite having over 37,000 facilities, some families, particularly in urban areas such as Tokyo, have difficulty finding openings for their children in government-approved facilities. “Because of the shortage of licensed facilities, 233,000 children were cared for in 11,153 unlicensed centers (recognized and unrecognized) in 2009” (Jones, 2011, p. 11). However, a facility being unlicensed does not necessarily mean that the quality of care is subpar. Instead, being unlicensed means that the facility does not meet all of the criteria set by the government, such as the size of the property, location, or recommended student/teacher ratio.

In 2006, the government began to develop Centers for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), a program that merges academic preparation with more holistic approaches to childcare and is jointly regulated by MEXT and MHLW. One of the purposes of the ECEC was to provide all-day care and flexible hours for a family in which both the mother and father might work. Although parents generally give high marks to ECECs, they are more complicated to operate and so have been slow to launch (OECD, 2012a).

In general, kindergartens and childcare centers that offer early care in Japan are well-equipped with gymnasiums, swimming pools, pianos, and televisions, and they are generally of good quality. All kindergartens and childcare centers require teachers to hold teaching certificates. In a comparative study of approaches to early childhood education, Nagayama and Gilliard (2005) found that American early childhood teachers focused on creating activities based on the needs and talents of the individual child, while Japanese early childhood teachers focused on “promoting community and regard for others” (p. 137).

Private Schools

Despite large numbers of young children under the age of six enrolled in private kindergarten or daycare centers, only 1% of primary and 7% of middle grades students attend private schools. Enrollments in private schools surge again during the teen years, when about a third of students go to private high schools. Private school enrollment increases to 80% for students enrolling in universities and junior colleges, and to 90% for students enrolling in specialized training colleges (MEXT, 2014a). In urban areas such as Tokyo, private schools may be chosen because they feature a specific curriculum or may have a more prestigious reputation than public options. In rural areas, however, private schools tend to be for students who cannot meet the rigorous criteria of nearby public schools (M. Yasuda, personal communication, January 15, 2015).

The government pays about half the salaries of all teachers in private schools. According to MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, 2014a):

Private schools play important roles, both qualitatively and quantitatively, in the development of Japan’s school education. Accordingly, MEXT positions the promotion of private schools as an important policy goal, under which it strives to maintain and improve these schools’ educational and research conditions and reduce the financial burden of learning for students and pupils enrolled there. (2014a, p. 5)

Indeed, private schools perform an essential role in the Japanese educational system. Perhaps the biggest problem with regard to private schools is that they are not available in all parts of Japan.

Structure of the School

As in most countries that are members of the OECD, students enter first grade around age six. In most Japanese schools, the day begins in the morning around 8:30 with 15 minutes of announcements in homeroom or a school assembly. Because schools do not provide transportation, students walk, ride with their parents, or take public trains or buses from home to school. Classes last around 45 minutes, and students receive a 5-10 minute break in-between each class. Lunch usually begins around 12:30 and lasts for forty minutes. Many elementary schools include a 20-minute recess every day, although sometimes recess is combined with time spent cleaning and organizing the classroom. (Japanese children are expected to clean their classrooms every day.)

For most students in grades 1-3, school ends after lunch. Students in grades 4-6 take an additional class or two, so school lasts until 3:00 or 4:00 p.m. Students in elementary school usually participate in a club or extracurricular activity after school once or twice per week. In middle school (grades 7-9) and high school (grades 10-12), students often stay longer and more frequently after school to participate in sports and clubs. In most schools, students remain in one classroom and teachers rotate from room to room over the course of the school day.

Prior to April 2002, students in public schools in Japan (from elementary to high school) attended school six days per week, Monday to Saturday. In 2002, in an effort to reduce student stress and increase innovation, MEXT announced a policy of *Yutori Kyoiku*, meaning “pressure-free education,” which translated into no formal study at school on Saturdays, though students and teachers continued to participate in extracurricular activities, such as sports (baseball, soccer) or clubs (band, dance) on Saturdays (Takayama, 2007).

Despite the prohibition against academic classes on Saturdays, as many as half of the public schools in Tokyo have held classes at least one Saturday per month since 2010, under the loophole that a school could hold Saturday school if there existed a “special need” (Shimbun, 2013). An advantage of private schools is that they could legally ignore the “five-day rule” imposed on public schools. Many private schools never shifted to the five-day school week (Fish, 2014).

Japanese students spend many days at school, and holidays tend to be brief. In 1971, Japanese law established that “the minimum number of school days per year is prescribed as 240” (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, Table 26, 2014b). Although the number of days that Japanese children attend school remains among the highest in the world, students do not spend all of their time listening to class lectures. One goal of the Second Basic Plan, ratified in 2013, was for “each and every individual to engage proactively with learning aimed at independence, collaboration and creativity” (MEXT, 2014c, p. 15).

In 2011, MEXT set the maximum size of a first-grade class in elementary school at 35 students (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2014a, p. 3). Average class size in all grades of elementary school is around 26 students; average class size at the secondary level is around 31 students (Jones, 2011, p. 12), though the number of students per classroom is frequently higher in urban schools.

The Curriculum

All aspects of the curriculum are regulated in Japan, from the activities suggested for 3-year-olds in public kindergarten to the teaching of advanced mathematics in high school. MEXT, in collaboration with faculty in higher education and the Central Council for Education, establishes the content of what is taught in Japanese schools. “The curriculum for each grade level is carefully calibrated to pick up each year where the previous grade left off, and to ensure preparation for the following grade” (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2014, p. 1). As As a result, Japanese schools do not face abrupt changes to the curriculum, common in some American schools, when budget cuts force the closure of “non-essential” programs in art, music, and physical education.

In the primary grades, the required curriculum includes moral education, the Japanese language, social studies, mathematics, and science. Art, music, homemaking, physical education, and literature are also mandated. A new law, ratified in 2011, required English to be taught beginning in grade 5, though subsequently MEXT has recommended that the teaching of English be moved down to grade 3 by 2020. A typical schedule for primary school is described in Table 2.

Table 2: Typical schedule for primary school (National Institute for Educational Policy Research, 2012, p. 2)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Time** | **Event** |
| 8:00-8:30 | Arrive at school |
| 8:30-8:40 | Morning assembly for the entire school |
| 8:40-9:25 | 1st class |
| 9:30-10:15 | 2nd class |
| 10:15-10:35 | Break |
| 10:35-11:20 | 3rd class |
| 11:25-12:20 | 4th class |
| 12:10-12:55 | Lunch |
| 12:55-1:15 | Lunch break (students clean the classroom and/or building) |
| 1:35-2:20 | 5th class |
| 2:25-3:10 | 6th class |
| 2:20-2:30 | End of the day homeroom for students with 5 classes |
| 3:10-3:20 | End of the day homeroom for students with 6 classes |
| 3:30 | Dismissal |
| 3:30-5:00 | Clubs or extracurricular activities |

The National Institute for Educational Policy Research (2012) states the following:

In most cases, a first-grader’s school week consists of four days with five school hours and one day with four school hours, and for second-graders, every school day has five school hours. Generally, a third-grader’s week has three days with five school-hours and two days with six school-hours, and fourth- to sixth-graders usually have two days with five school hours and three days with six school hours. The number of classes varies in accordance with the difference in total school hours laid out in the Course of Study. (p. 2)

The number of hours spent per subject is also regulated by MEXT. The annual number of hours spent per subject is established by grade level and is shown in Table 3.

Table 3: School hours by subject and grade in Japanese primary schools (National Institute for Educational Policy Research, 2012, p. 9)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Subject** | **Grade 1** | **Grade 2** | **Grade 3** | **Grade 4** | **Grade 5** | **Grade 6** |
| Japanese (language) | 306 | 315 | 245 | 245 | 175 | 175 |
| Social studies | 0 | 0 | 70 | 90 | 100 | 105 |
| Mathematics | 136 | 175 | 175 | 175 | 175 | 175 |
| Science | 0 | 0 | 90 | 105 | 105 | 105 |
| Living environment studies | 102 | 105 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Music | 68 | 70 | 60 | 60 | 50 | 50 |
| Arts and handicrafts | 68 | 70 | 60 | 60 | 50 | 50 |
| Home economics | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 60 | 55 |
| Physical education | 102 | 105 | 105 | 105 | 90 | 90 |
| Moral education | 34 | 35 | 35 | 35 | 35 | 35 |
| Special activities | 34 | 35 | 35 | 35 | 35 | 35 |
| Integrated studies | 0 | 0 | 70 | 70 | 70 | 70 |
| Foreign language activities (usually English) | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 35 | 35 |
| Total school-hours | 850 | 910 | 945 | 980 | 980 | 980 |

Education reforms established in 2002 (*yutori*) reduced the amount of time devoted to core subjects, shortened the school day, and introduced “integrated studies,” which offered contemporary, often multi-disciplinary approaches to learning. Subsequent reforms in 2011 increased the amount of time devoted to core subjects, lengthened the school day, and reduced time allotted to integrated studies (Fish, 2014).

Special Education

The Japanese education system tends to segregate students with disabilities (Jordan, 2009). Most Japanese children with special needs are taught in designated schools exclusively for them (*Tokubetsu-Shien-gakko*), though since the establishment of new policies in 2007, there seems to be some effort to provide services for select special needs students in separate classrooms within schools, or in cases of mild disability, in regular classrooms.

In a recent qualitative study of special needs students with mild disabilities, all the children who were observed asked to be removed from the regular classroom and placed in an environment with other special needs children (Kayama & Haight, 2012). The researchers attributed the children’s decision to attend classes apart from their peers in mainstream classrooms to an awareness of each child’s *kokoro* (heart and mind). However, the pressure to conform to norms within a classroom and the disgrace associated with failing to do well in school certainly contribute to the motivation of these students to leave the highly-competitive classroom.

The Life of a Teacher

It is telling that, when the idea of public education emerged in Japan, most of the nation’s first teachers were samurai, or came from the samurai class. Perhaps this heritage is one reason that the job of a teacher has always carried very high status (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2014). Having samurai roots may be one reason that more males choose the teaching profession in Japan in comparison to other countries. In 2011, men comprised 35% of teachers in primary schools, 58% of teachers in lower secondary schools, 72% of teachers in upper secondary schools, and 81% of faculty in post-secondary institutions (OECD, 2013). The prestige of the profession is enhanced by a law that requires teachers to be among the highest paid civil servants in Japan. As a result, beginning teachers are paid about the same as beginning engineers (OECD, 2013). The usual career trajectory is from teacher to head teacher and from head teacher to principal. MEXT has established 36 steps lading to salary increases for teachers; 20 steps within the rank of head teacher; 15 different salary steps for principals. In general, teachers’ salaries rise sharply as years of experience increase (OECD, 2013, p. 10).

The process of becoming a teacher is highly competitive and quite rigorous. Only about 14% of applicants gain admission into schools of education, The National Entrance Exam for admission to undergraduate teacher preparation programs assesses five fields: Japanese language, foreign language (usually English), mathematics, science, and social studies. In addition to the requisite admission tests, teachers must pass exams on subject-area knowledge and pedagogical techniques once they complete their course of study. Students who successfully pass exams and manage to graduate do a 3-week teaching internship before graduation. Elementary/middle school teachers do an additional 1-week nursing internship. Due to the tight job market and falling birth rates, after the internship, only about one in three graduates of teacher preparation programs actually lands a job as a teacher (Ikuo, 2014). Aspiring teachers also must pass an additional battery of exams created by prefectural school boards as part of their consideration for employment. Most school boards also require interviews, the submission of essays, and demonstration lessons before an offer of employment is made (OECD, 2013).

Once hired, all first year teachers are required to spend a year under the mentorship of a veteran teacher, who is relieved of additional duties to focus on the professional development of the first year teacher. Prefectural boards of education may require daily in-service training and further education for teachers at 5, 10, and 20 years of service. A new system implemented by MEXT in 2009 requires teachers to demonstrate that they are current in their content knowledge.

While teachers in Italy, the Netherlands, and the United States typically spend more than 1000 hours teaching over the course of a year, teachers in Japan, on average, teach for 731 hours at the primary level, 602 hours at the lower secondary level, and 510 hours at the upper secondary level (OECD, 2013). Despite teaching for less time, Japanese teachers spend more total time at school than teachers in almost any other country. Usually, Japanese teachers spend additional hours supervising student activities, completing administrative chores, planning lessons with colleagues, and counseling students (Arani, Fukaya, and Lassegard, 2010). Instead of having desks in individual classrooms or in private offices, teachers share space in a large, comfortable, community room. This faculty room *(shokuin shitsu*) is a designated space where teachers congregate to plan lessons, grade papers, call parents, and get “advice from administrators and veteran colleagues” (Ahn, 2014, p. 50).

Attrition among teachers in Japan is quite low, with only about one percent of teachers leaving the profession at the end of the first year. The relatively high-paying, high-prestige occupation of teaching in Japan helps keep the profession attractive. However, the workload of teaching, at times, can be staggering. For example, when an adolescent has a run-in with the police, the teacher and the parents are likely to be contacted, and all are expected to respond. As Tsuneyoshi (2001) has noted, “when the classroom teacher is in charge of the entire child, both mind and body, with the added pressures of new problems, the load can be overwhelming” (p. 113). Regarding the workload of a teacher, a recent blog by a teacher in rural Japan commented, “Teachers are here by 7 a.m. and don’t leave until 6:30-7 p.m. Then there’s Saturday…4 hours on Sat. So, it’s more like 55-60 hour work weeks” (Kairosity, 2014, p. 1).

Entrance Exams

One reason that students take school so seriously in Japan is that the stakes at every level are quite high. Passing the tests determines admission to secondary and post-secondary institutions, which in turn, clarifies possible career options, which, in turn, determines salary and social class. Although entrance exams are required for most schools, such as private elementary schools or kindergartens, the two most important exams—that everyone takes--are for admission into high schools and universities.

Public high schools are ranked by academic reputation, with the most prestigious high schools only admitting students with the highest scores on the exams prepared by the board of education of the prefectural regions. Private high schools prepare their own exams for students. In general, the complexity and difficulty of exams correspond with the schools’ academic ranking. Similarly, universities are ranked according to their reputation, with The University of Tokyo having the most stature and thus, the most stringent admission requirements.

There are seven possibilities for students after completing the high school entrance exam at age 15 (MEXT, 2014b):

1. A student enrolls in a public high school (about 62%)
2. A student enrolls in a private high school (about 27%)
3. A student takes courses online or through correspondence (about 5%)
4. A student enrolls in a Special Needs school (about 2%)
5. A student enrolls in a College of Technology, specializing in a program such as engineering (about 1%)
6. A student enrolls in a Specialized Training College that might emphasize job preparation in the fields of health/medicine, technology, business, personal care and nutrition, fashion and home science, and agriculture (about 1%)
7. A student starts working in a job or becomes unemployed (about 2% of Japanese students leave school at age 15)

Because so much depends upon the performance on tests,after-hours tutoring for students, or *juku*, is common practice. The most popular subject areas for juku are the Japanese language, mathematics and English (The Economist, 2011). Juku extends the curriculum well beyond what is covered in schools and is designed to help students perform well on entrance exams, especially those of high-ranking high schools. Since students are required to submit transcripts when applying for schools, it is important for students to maintain high grades and good behavior.

More than twenty business firms that offer *juku* are large and wealthy enough to issue shares of stock, which are traded on the Tokyo stock exchange. About the widespread acceptance of *juku*, *The Economist* (2011) comments:

Almost one in five children in their first year of primary school attends after-class instruction, rising to nearly all university-bound high schoolers. The fees are around {Yen} 260,000 ($3,300) annually. School and university test-scores rise in direct proportion to spending on *juku*. (p. 26)

Of course, the intensity and duration of *juku* is widely variable, depending upon the student, parents, and family income. Nevertheless, most Japanese students devote long hours to study after the school day officially ends (The Economist, 2011).

Conclusion

A visitor to Japanese schools from Europe or North America would find much on the surface that seems familiar. Students wear uniforms, sit in rows, and listen to a teacher, who typically directs instruction from the front of a classroom. Class periods usually last between 45 and 60 minutes. The system is set up so that students participate in a logical progression from one grade level to another, based upon their age and relative performance. Early childhood education segues into elementary, which transitions to secondary and post-secondary schooling with crucial, high-stakes exams as gatekeepers in between.

Despite superficial resemblances, schools in Japan are distinctively and irrepressibly Japanese. Unlike the relatively chaotic and de-centralized systems of education in the United States, the Japanese system, reliant upon the rulings of MEXT, is stable and centralized. As a result, the delivery of curriculum, the education of teachers, and the expectations for students are set at the national level. In most states in the United States, the quality of education varies by the income of the parents who live in the neighborhoods near a school. Consequently, a child who grows up in Silicon Valley in California can attend a posh, well-manicured neighborhood school that regularly knocks the top off exam scores and sponsors field trips to the Galapagos, while a child who grows up in the ranchlands a few miles east of Silicon Valley may be educated in dilapidated buildings and have no access to drinkable water (Baines, 2014).

Such blatant discrimination against poor children would not be tolerated in Japan. In fact, Japan is one of only 16 OECD countries in which socio-economically disadvantaged schools actually have lower student-teacher ratios than socio-economically advantaged schools (OECD, 2012b, p. 6). In addition, teachers in Japan rotate to different schools over the course of their careers, usually, every seven years or so (OECD, 2013). In this way, brilliant teachers are not congregated in the richest schools, as sometimes happens in the American and European systems of schooling. Rather, brilliant teachers are distributed in rich and poor areas throughout the country.

In the United States, charter schools are proliferating (Powell, 2014). In San Diego, the Iftin Charter School admits students who are of the Muslim faith and mostly from Somalia. The By the Hand Charter School in Chicago is funded by an evangelistic Christian organization that provides both Bible lessons and after-school snacks. Although the state of Michigan struggled with budgetary shortfalls over the past few decades, it spent over a billion dollars supporting charter schools in 2014, though many of the publicly-supported charter schools are among the lowest-performing schools in the nation and have been among the lowest-performing schools in the nation for more than a decade (Detroit Free Press, 2014).

The Chief Executive Officer of the largest charter school operator in the United States paid himself about $3.6 million dollars in 2014 and hired his wife as Chief Academic Officer (Education Matters, 2014). Yet, state governments, with the fiscal support of the federal government, continue to urge the fragmentation of public education through charter school expansion.

Of course, any Japanese educator would be aghast at both the disjointed, wildly variable forms of schooling that are funded through taxpayer dollars and the way that legislators in the United States. have sub-contracted the education of children to profiteers. MEXT ensures that all children have access to quality teachers, stresses the importance of community, and promotes the power of individual student effort. On the other hand, in the United States, charter schools create their own curriculum, stress widely divergent goals, and focus upon the predilections of their founders.

Another striking difference between education in Japan and education in other countries is the difference in expectations for teachers. In Japan, only the best students are accepted into teacher preparation programs. Prospective teachers in Japan must pass rigorous tests, repeatedly demonstrate their teaching skills, undergo several high-pressure interviews, and, even if they succeed in all these areas, they still might not get hired. All teachers in Japan, no matter where or what they teach, are well-educated and well-paid (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2014).

In some parts of the U.S., any college graduate can become a teacher—and they can become a teacher almost instantaneously. In Texas, more than half of all new teachers are alternatively certified, and alternative certification is sold on the open market by for-profit businesses as if it were laundry detergent (Baines, 2010b). Billboards along the highways in Texas compete to sell their online teacher certification as the cheapest and easiest routes available with slogans such as, “Want to teach? When can you start?” Recent laws passed in Indiana and New Mexico allow anyone with a bachelor’s degree in any discipline to teach; in Kentucky, a former member of the military who holds a bachelor’s degree does not need to take a course in pedagogy or engage in any sort of teacher training (Baines, 2010a). The state of Kentucky offers teaching certificates to any veteran with a bachelor’s degree who wants to teach. who wants to teach.

Stellar teacher preparation programs exist in the United States, and they are usually similar in length and rigor to teacher preparation programs in Japan, which means that they are also relatively costly. As teacher pay remains low in most parts of the United States, quick and easy alternative certification programs continue to grow in popularity, despite the evidence that alternative certification brings with it corresponding decreases in student performance and belittlement of the teaching profession (Baines, 2010b; Vasquez Heilig & Jez, 2014).

Of course, not everything about education in Japan is ideal. By its nature, MEXT is a huge bureaucracy that must serve multiple constituents and fulfill manifold responsibilities. Any change in curriculum or policy must be communicated years in advance and implemented gradually over time. Thus, the Japanese government announced in 2013 that it would move the teaching of English to third grade (English is currently taught beginning in fifth grade) in 2020 (Yoshida, 2013). That is, MEXT gave teachers seven years advanced warning of the possible change in curriculum. . . While consistency is important, one of the shortcomings of a large bureaucracy is that it may not be particularly nimble.

Although MEXT’s heavy emphasis on high achievement promotes high performance, it is less effective in other areas. For example, bullying is a widespread problem in Japanese schools, despite repeated efforts by MEXT to cultivate tolerance and acceptance among children (McCurry, 2013).

Finally, the complaint that Japanese students are relatively less creative than some of their counterparts in other parts of the world probably has some legitimacy. After all, Japanese students, in general, study diligently while at school, participate in a variety of extracurricular activities, and then spend myriad hours in *juku*, sometimes until 9-10 p.m., five or six nights a week (The Economist, 2011). Surviving the workload and the mounting pressures of academic performance are sufficiently taxing. There may be little time or energy left for chasing the ephemeral muse of creativity.

After the end of World War II, the United States acted as Japan’s advisor as the nation created a new K-12 educational system. The *Report of the United States Education Mission to Japan* (United States Department of State, 1946), published in 1946, excoriated Japan’s previous educational system as elitist and restrictive and chastised the Japanese for allowing the intrusion of religion and politics into schools. In particular, the *Mission Report* criticized the Japanese because their previous system of education:

1. “Prepared different types of education for the masses and the privileged minority class,”
2. Ignored “differences of ability and interest among students,”
3. “Reduced the opportunities for teachers to exercise their professional freedom,” and
4. Established a “yardstick of efficiency” based upon “how far standardization and uniformity was ensured” (Aso & Amano, 1972, pp. 64-65).

Over the past seventy years, Japan’s new democratic educational system has flourished and has become one of the strongest in the world. On the other hand, the United States has taken four practices elucidated as “malicious” by American consultants in the *Mission Report*—elitism, lack of differentiated instruction, reduced freedom for teachers, standardization and uniformity--and made them the cornerstone for American education reform for the 21st century. In response to waning American achievement and fading student enthusiasm, politicians in the United States have chosen not to abandon these four reprehensible practices, but to “double down” on them, with predictably disastrous results.

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