

# Japanese Society and Education

By Hirohashi Gikei

## The overall characteristics of Japan's education system

Japan's current education system was established according to guidelines set out by the U.S. educational mission to Japan after 1945. The original guidelines set out have been altered and improved since then as times have changed, leading to the system as it stands at present. During this time a 180° turn was effected from the former militaristic and nationalistic educational system to one based on democratic principals. The educational guidelines arose out of a period where confusion reigned in education just after World War II, creating a myriad of problems. But Japanese adaptability made it possible to find a way to establish U.S. democratic educational principals in new soil. Japan's overall educational characteristics can be seen as having developed within two larger periods. The first beginning in the 1860s, where the major issue facing the country and its approach to education was how to catch up with the West, and the second period beginning after the close of World War II.

Education during this first period was based on an ideology stressing loyalty and patriotism, moving finally to one inspired by militarism during its latter half, and the further centralization of national control of the educational system in the hands of the Mombusho (Japanese Ministry of Education) as the means to furthering national goals.

The second period of development in Japan's educational system was, as has been earlier indicated, directed by the United States, gradually taking on a more characteristically Japanese flavor until reaching its current stage. Education during this second period has stressed basic human rights, freedom and equality—a radical change from the approach of the earlier period. Researchers who lived through the period just before and during World War II

often say that cranial activity lessened after the war ended. It can be said that Japan's successes in advanced scientific and technical research since World War II are due to the establishment of democratic principals in education.

At the same time, the last 50 years of education in Japan has also seen the development of a variety of problems. These include the dramatic increase in the ratio of students going on to higher education, reflecting the increasingly educated level of society, the increased competitiveness of exams, and the subsequent decline in the capacity of families and regional communities to properly handle these educational issues. This in turn has led to an increase in problem behavior amongst both young children and adolescents. Moreover, those aspects of education affecting the development of spirit among young people are treated too lightly, as is physical education. In other words, the educational system is oriented most heavily toward a limited approach to academic studies alone. Strong opinions have arisen of late that the curriculum should be organized so as to bring increasing weight to both moral, or spiritual, education and physical education.

Contemporary Japanese society is changing rapidly, while, at the same time, Japan is increasingly required to fulfill its role as an active member of the international community, despite its post-war passive stance in response to having relinquished its military past. In this changing social and political environment, it becomes even more desirable to reconsider some aspects of Japanese education. Demands are especially high now on Japan from the international community to take a more active global role due to its recent economic success. And this increasingly international approach affects education as well—in other words, education also must rise to more international standards. Japan is gradually coming to

seek an educational system which will nurture people who can consider and put education to practice in an international perspective. One of the new developments is the suggestion by a recent educational committee that English language study should begin at the elementary school level.

## Japan's educational system and the examination system

Representative in Japan's public educational system is the division of levels between six years of elementary school, three years of junior high school, three years of senior high school, and four years of college. This is the system which was introduced by the U.S. educational mission just after World War II. This includes nine years of compulsory education, along with high school and college. Technically speaking, as can be seen from the division between required and upper level education, the system originally intended to provide general guidelines within which the individual would have a choice in how to handle his or her own education. The major characteristic here, and that which differs greatly from the earlier period of Japan's educational system, is that the current one is a single track system, whereas the older system was a two-track one. Aside from basic education, preschool education is also offered at kindergartens and nursery schools in Japan for small children, as well as post-graduate studies for those going beyond the four year college or university.

It is often pointed out that Japan's scholastic achievement is one of the highest in the world, but the heart of the matter is *why* Japanese scholastic achievement may be the highest in the world. The competitiveness of Japan's high school and college entry exams can be pointed out as the main reason this is so. Students now advancing from the junior high school level to the high



school level now totals 97% of total graduates, with the requisite rush to compete for limited entry to the best schools. Meanwhile, the percentage of students moving on from high school to college level now stands at over 35%, or 50% if junior college is included, so it should be easy to imagine the heated competition that accompanies going on to higher education. One of the reasons for this rush to enter the country's best universities is Japan's increasing orientation toward quality higher education, along with the rising economic power of the Japanese. Moreover, this orientation has led to a virtual industry in private educational resources geared toward preparation for college entrance exams, including private tutors, cram schools and college preparatory schools. Being that the college years provide young adults with, among other things, several treasured years of freedom and fun before entry into the ranks of lifetime employees, there is an even harder drive toward the use of these private institutions as a means of improving academic performance.

Public schools in Japan tend not to divide classes according to individual ability. Both teachers and parents tend to be strongly against this approach. However, cram schools and preparatory schools do engage in this approach to structuring classes. The possibilities for a more individual approach to teaching than is now available in the public schools is not ignored here. In this sense it would have to be recognized that this "playing tag" between the private cram schools and the public schools has, along with the increasing economic power of the Japanese family and its orientation toward higher education, led to the current, high scholastic achievement of junior high school and high school students.

It is often said that Japanese universities are difficult to get into, but easy to graduate from. Three years of very serious study take place during the high school years as a means of passing the difficult college entrance exams, as well as company entry exams given by prospective employers. However, once in college, students have much free time

in which to relax and enjoy themselves in their first year. Herein lies the mystery of the rapid development of Japan's scientific and technical advances.

Although it does not seem so reasonable on the surface to simply inject young people with all of the academic basics immediately prior to their physical and intellectual completion, it is still a fact that today's college students can boast of high academic performance. In this sense it could be said that the years of relaxation and enjoyment under this condition are the logical outcome of prior years of study, and that this final stage in the student's educational experience can actually be useful for the great progress and improvement in their next professional education.

## **The characteristics of Japan's school education**

### ***Preschool education (nursery school and kindergarten)***

Kindergarten education is carried out according to the government's official kindergarten guidelines while nursery school education is operated in accordance with Ministry of Health and Welfare guidelines. Nursery school attendance is optional, and both public and privately run schools are available. Attendance of nursery schools currently stands at over 95%, but at the same time Japan's birthrate is dropping, leading to heightened competition between schools to fill attendance roles. Recent trends in early childhood education show a pronounced increase in academic orientation beginning at an early age, not all of these necessarily the most appropriate for the promotion of healthy early childhood development. It is therefore very desirable at this time that further improvements in this educational field be made.

### ***Elementary school education***

Compulsory education includes six years of elementary school education. With the exception of a portion of elementary school graduates who choose to move on to private schools at the junior high school level, the general

trend is that there is no advance to a higher level of schooling, so in this sense it cannot necessarily be said that efforts in the area of educational development have been completely activated. Meanwhile, another notable characteristic of Japan's elementary school education is that 70% of the total number of teachers are women. This leads to some problems in terms of bringing about the perfection of elementary school education.

Actual educational practice has developed under the curriculum guidelines of the Ministry of Education. One of these guidelines sets the number of students per class at 40, which is extremely high, and makes individual teacher guidance difficult. Since one teacher handles all subjects, teaching demands often exceed capabilities. This, too, is another major problem now facing Japan's public school education at the elementary school level.

### ***Junior high school education***

The next three years of compulsory education is at the junior high school level. As the percentage of students moving onto senior high school increases, demand for an intensive academic orientation increases in contrast to the focus at the elementary school level.

The number of students per class stands at 40, and students have a different teacher for each subject, meaning that the amount of time teachers spend with each student is limited in comparison to lower grades. This has led to some characteristic problems in Japan, such as bullying and truancy. Meanwhile, though this age group is one which requires more education of character and physical exercise, academic studies tend to be stressed above all else. Adding further to the problems experienced at this level of education, actual examples of high school entry tests offered in previous years are no longer available by private companies. This makes deciding on the best school even more difficult.

### ***High school education***

High school attendance is based on personal choice, whereby the student





Tokyo's examination industry mecca, Yoyogi. Day after day it flourishes by pursuing young people caught up in exam preparation.

may choose which high school he or she would like to enter, and then study to pass the entrance exam for that particular school. However, the rise in the percentage of students going on to high school has led to an increase in the difference in individual capabilities within the same level, the cut-off point being students who have gained the assistance of the cram school approach, which is based on the usage of practice tests geared toward certain schools. These students tend to be the ones who get

into the best schools. As a result, the difference in academic achievement levels between different schools is also on the rise. Meanwhile, Japanese society's orientation toward not only higher education, but education received at a handful of the best schools, fans the flames of competition to pass entry exams to the best universities. Instruction therefore tends to be oriented primarily toward the passing of college entrance exams. At the same time, the high school drop-out rate is increas-

ing. The cause of this trend is thought to be the inappropriate choice of high schools and related academic environment made by parents and teachers.

### College education

The major characteristic of Japanese universities is the difficulty of passing entrance examinations in contrast with the ease with which most students manage to graduate. As with high school entrance exams, entry is based on a strict assessment of academic performance. Therefore, attendance at a particular college often depends on having attended a cram school where practice tests for particular colleges are used. This in turn leads to a widening of difference in academic performance levels between colleges. On the other hand, accreditation standards for universities are now being revised, and college education becoming based on a wider network. Some of these changes include a reconsideration of the structure of general education. In the past, the first two years of college were concentrated on general education, and the final two and graduate school concentrated on the student's major area of study. This structuring of the college years is now disappearing, and the trend moving toward more coherence in education.

Meanwhile, college life itself tends to be both peaceful and enjoyable with the days of student political movements in the past. The current tendency appears to be that students are sent to college by their parents, and then students spend their free time doing recreational activities financed by working part-time.

At the same time, there also appears to be a rise in a focus on individual needs above all else amongst Japanese students. There is a tendency toward a loss of the awareness of the importance of community. In a country such as Japan, with its limited resources, this can be a dangerous tendency for the future of the nation.

This forgetting of their basic existence as members of society leads to the loss of a moral sensibility amongst young people. It is therefore necessary to look seriously at this aspect of education in the future.



### **Graduate school**

The tendency to continue to graduate level studies has been on the rise over the past several years. The Ministry of Education is now pushing strongly for the streamlining of graduate studies at Japanese universities due to the need to prepare academically for the intensification of scientific and technical developments, interdisciplinary progress system, and promotion of scholarship. At the same time, the population of college-age persons in Japan is falling, and one of the means of future survival being used by many universities is the enhancement of their graduate studies programs, including and expanding the number of students attending graduate school and the extent of graduate studies available. Many universities are now making great efforts to establish new education and research sectors that accompany graduate and doctoral programs, while, at the same time, making attempts to increase entry into these and other programs. In addition, Japan's universities are increasingly introducing continuing education programs and night schools for adults. One of the problem points seen now for graduate studies is the difficulty of attaining the doctoral level in the area of Humanities, along with the difficulty of finding employment once the doctorate has been obtained.

### **The characteristics of Japan's home and social education**

#### **Home education**

Education at home in Japan has apparently declined over the years with the advent of the nuclear family.

A household where grandparents, parents and children live together should be able to function as an important means of nurturing and developing character; however, Japan's traditional family structure has deteriorated with the advent of the nuclear family, and Japan's traditional system of home educational experiences has unfortunately been weakening. A myriad of problems has developed over recent years involving young children and adolescents, including bullying and cutting classes, and it is felt that the best

means to fight these problems is to place more emphasis on the educational role of the home environment. In addition to this issue, a lack of religious education and training has also become notable in Japanese society.

#### **Social education**

Major changes are now occurring in Japan's social education system in response to the concentrated population in major metropolitan areas, along with the subsequent collapse of traditional communities. In addition to the population issue is the rapidly aging society and the related problems this brings, including adulthood diseases and senility. A question for the future will be the means of activating a social education system which can handle the various existing problems.

As Japan enters a new era where the average life expectancy reaches well into the eighties, the development of a society which can provide lifelong education becomes an issue. Various approaches to this question are increasingly being offered.

### **Current problems in Japan's educational system and future directions**

The future direction of Japan's educational system needs to be oriented toward gaining the world's affection in the increasingly international environment, as well as increasing Japan's ability to offer more varied cooperation on the international level. These necessities were strongly acknowledged during the meetings of the National Council on Educational Reform which met in August 1988. This council promoted educational reforms, with internationalization, and fostering of persons capable of adapting to an information-intensive society at its center. In addition, an educational approach which will prepare the populace for the coming aging society (i.e. efforts toward development of lifelong education) was also suggested.

Curriculum guidelines for kindergarten, elementary school, junior and senior high school were revised in December 1987 in response to the report

of the Curriculum Council, and officially announced to the public in 1990. Educational proposals were made in consideration of social change, along with the accompanying evolution of the life and consciousness of children of all age groups, based on the commitment to cultivate a foundation for lifelong learning, and to develop an educational system capable of producing an open-minded populace which can face the 21st Century. New educational developments based upon these guidelines are already occurring. Notable amongst these efforts are the following items.

(1) Improved education of the spirit:

Through all aspects of educational activities, children shall be encouraged, according to their developmental level and the character of each subject in use, to develop an open and thoughtful mind, and a character which can handle serious life issues head on.

(2) Concentration on the basics, along with promotion of independent education:

Concentration will be placed on basics thought to be important to a Japanese citizen, along with approaches to education meant to encourage positive individuality. More coherence will be brought out, for example, in each subject from kindergarten through high school.

(3) Development of self-education capability:

Concentration will also be placed on the cultivation of the imagination and the capability to independently adapt to social change through encouraging the development of the interest and initiative to learn on one's own.

(4) Respect for culture and tradition coupled with international understanding:

While focusing on the development of a respectful attitude toward Japanese traditions, understanding of world cultures and history will also be deepened, with a Japanese citizenry capable of membership in international society cultivated.

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