

Using Videos to Compare K-12 Schooling and Society Within Japan

By Scott Johnston

Often when we hear about Japanese education in the U.S. mass media, stories dominate about young children taking entrance examinations, cramming for tests, and facing stress. Seldom do we discover what students do in schools and how society influences schooling and children. As a result, many children and adults develop the notion that the process of education in Japan is homogenous from elementary through high school. Issues such as examination hell and cram school become associated with the entire K-12 educational system. For example, many Americans may think that most Japanese students attend juku or cram schools. Yet, cram school enrollment in 2000 was 29.2 percent for elementary, 57.3 percent for lower secondary, and 31 percent for upper secondary.¹ Americans may have the impression that most high school graduates from academic high schools attend a university. Yet, around 29.7 percent of graduates go from academic high schools to a four-year college, 16.2 percent to a junior college, 33.3 percent attend private specialist schools, 13.4 percent start full-time work, and 7.2 percent do something else.²

One way to help students or adults gain a better understanding of the similarities and differences between elementary and high school children in Japan is through showing videos and comparing and contrasting school and social influences. This comparison of schooling through videos can be carried out in a range of environments from elementary school through adult learners. I use this particular approach with undergraduates planning to be teachers to help them gain an understanding of how the education system and children are different within Japan.

In the next section I introduce some videos and then present one possible approach to discuss Japanese education. These videos are relatively short and focus on education and society in Japan. I try to avoid long videos; however, if I do use a longer video, I often show segments. I find that while long videos may be entertaining, the learners have difficulty remembering important contrasts.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Families of Japan IN THE GLOBAL FAMILIES SERIES (1998)

AVAILABILITY: SOCIAL STUDIES SCHOOL SERVICE

10200 JEFFERSON BLVD., BOX 802, CULVER CITY, CA 90232

PHONE: 800-421-4246

URL: <http://catalog.socialstudies.com>

This video comes with a Teacher's Guide and the audio script. The guide provides questions for the students to think about, and the script is helpful to the teacher as he/she outlines key ideas. This video depicts the lives of two elementary school students, one urban and one rural. It presents students walking to school, cleaning the classroom, and eating in the classroom. Cooperation emerges as a school-

wide philosophy. This video also examines the family and life outside school. The contrast between the rural and urban contexts of these two students is a great way to examine similarities and differences between elementary school students within Japan. The video depicts the life of each student in fifteen minutes (30 minutes).

The Children of Japan: Learning the New, Remembering the Old (1987)

AVAILABILITY: SOCIAL STUDIES SCHOOL SERVICE (\$79.00)

This video introduces Makoto, a sixth grader in Japan, who talks about school, family, and city life in Japan through a letter to a pen pal. It has great shots of the life of an elementary school student in and out of school. The only concern is that the boy is applying to a middle school that is attached to a high school and university. Thus, he is already studying for entrance examinations. Since most students do not take the university entrance examination until the last year of high school, this piece of the video may promote the stereotype that all elementary students study for entrance examinations (20 minutes).

ELEMENTARY AND HIGH SCHOOL

Challenge to America: Competing in the New Global Economy

The Heart of the Nation SEGMENT (1994)

AVAILABILITY: FILMS FOR THE HUMANITIES & SCIENCES

P.O. BOX 2053, PRINCETON, NJ 08543-2053

PHONE: 800-257-5126; FAX: 609-275-3767

E-MAIL: custserv@films.com

URL: <http://www.films.com>

ESSAYS

This is one part of a TV series shown on PBS that examined the connections between the industrial and educational systems in Japan, the U.S., and Germany. This video, *The Heart of the Nation*, compares second and twelfth grades, and it provides quite a contrast at these two levels both within Japan and in contrast to the U.S. In the Japanese elementary school, there are scenes of academic work, students serving food and cleaning the school. At the high school, we see students learning in the classroom, and teachers providing students with guidance for work or education after high school (58 minutes).

HIGH SCHOOL

Video Letter from Japan II: Suburban Tokyo High School Students (1988)

AVAILABILITY: ASIA SOCIETY

725 PARK AVENUE, NEW YORK, NY 10021

E-MAIL: AskAsia.org

URL: <http://www.asiasociety.org/publication/education.html>

Alternatively, it can be purchased from:

SASUGA JAPANESE BOOKSTORE

7 UPLAND ROAD, CAMBRIDGE, MA 02140

PHONE: 617-497-5460; FAX: 617-497-5362

E-MAIL: info@sasugabooks.comURL: <http://www.sasugabooks.com>

This is a series of six videos of which one is *Suburban Tokyo High School Students*. This video is about a group of high school students who are producing a video of their school. Although we see only a bit in the classroom, there is a great diversity represented by the high school students who are making this video and their futures. Some of their goals are to go to a university, get a job, go to a vocational school, and take a year off. In the video the students discuss their futures and the tension between studying and socializing. This video clearly demonstrates the diversity of paths in the educational system for students at just one high school (30 minutes).

ONE TEACHING APPROACH

Obviously, there are many ways that a comparison of schooling and society at elementary and secondary schools could be approached. For example, this could be done in a Japanese thematic unit or a workshop with teachers or adults. The following is one possible approach that I use by showing *Families of Japan* and *Video Letter to Japan II: Suburban Tokyo High School Students*. First, I find out what the audience knows about Japan and write all these ideas on the board. I just let the students brainstorm their ideas. Some ideas that have arisen in my college courses were: homogenous group, test-orientation, memorization, and year-round school. As the students present this information, I have them expand, if they can, on the ideas linked to schooling. This way any knowledge or stereotypes about education in Japan will come to the forefront for discussion. I save this information, as it is always interesting to come back to these initial impressions to see how their thinking may change.

I show the secondary video first because this is where the college entrance examinations become important, and many students do cram. This video may reinforce stereotypes that the students presented in the brainstorm session. While the learners watch the video, I have them keep in mind some of the ideas that were put on the board so that they can confirm or refute the original assumptions. Then I make a list of some key issues that came out at this level and put it in a table format (Table I). These issues are the focus as we watch the elementary video so that the comparisons afterwards become clearer. Included in the table are two columns for high school and elementary levels so that differences can be highlighted. I have added a "you" column so that each learner can include him/herself in the comparison.

After the students fill in the information, they briefly talk to one or two other students about their results. Then a large group discussion about the differences and similarities of schooling for these different levels stimulates the students to reflect on the extent to which schooling and goals within Japan are or are not homogenous.

Table I

COMPARISON TABLE OF POSSIBLE ISSUES

	High School	Elementary	You
Homework			
Cram School			
Examinations			
Family support			
Home chores			
Classroom			
Extracurricular			
Friends			
Responsibilities in school			

These videos are also excellent tools to introduce students—young and old—to Japanese society. In the videos, we can see the influences of society, culture, family, peers, and teachers in the lives of Japanese youth. The discussions about videos are important. I have learned, from trial and error, that it is critical to select a few main ideas that the learners need to think about. If I do not stick to these ideas, the learners may shift to details from the videos, such as students eating with chopsticks in school. If this happens, the key comparative messages become buried under minor details. Thus, I listen to these comments, but I always bring the discussion back to the main issues.

Since I teach college students who will become teachers, I have them focus on questions, such as “What would you do if one of these students was in your classroom?” After watching and discussing the videos, students respond to this question in their journals. Some responses are:

“We watched videos and realized that many of us were way off base. I guess when you think of the Japanese school system, you think of constant tests, even for the younger grades. However, it seems that a lot of the elementary schools were centered around group work and after school activities.”

“After watching the films on Japanese students, I recognized some differences in the way they are taught. Being an elementary education major, I would use more small group activities and stress responsibility (i.e., picking up after yourself, making sure your desk and area is clean).”

“I would also have to make sure that I work on concepts rather than just facts because this is what Japanese schools teach.”

Some of these quotes suggest a possible dilemma with using videos. While my students are beginning to rethink their views of Japanese education and students, they may also be creating new stereotypes, such as all students learn only concepts in Japanese schools. Thus, it is important to discuss their ideas and to provide other sources of information about Japanese education. I have included a list of resources that might be useful for further examination of education in Japan. ■

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES ON EDUCATION IN JAPAN

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Cummings, William and Philip Altbach, editors. *The Challenge of Eastern Asian Education: Implications for America*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1997.

Education About Asia, <http://www.aasianst.org/ea-toc.htm>.

Japan Information Network Site, *Statistics*, 2001,

http://www.jinjanet.org/stat/category_16.html (December 21, 2001).

Japan Times Newspaper in English, 2001, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/> (December 20, 2001).

K-12 Resources of the Asia Society, *Ask Asia*, 2001, <http://www.askasia.org/> (December 21, 2001).

Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, *Homepage*, 2001, <http://www.mext.go.jp/english/> (December 21, 2001).

National Clearinghouse for U.S.-Japan Studies, Indiana University, *Homepage*, December 19, 2001, <http://www.indiana.edu/~japan/> (December 21, 2001).

Okano, Kaori and Motonori Tsuchiya. *Education in Contemporary Japan: Inequality and Diversity*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Rohlen, Thomas. *Japan's High Schools*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983.

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Stigler, James and James Hiebert. *The Teaching Gap*. New York: The Free Press, 1999.

White, Merry. *The Material Child: Coming of Age in Japan and America*. New York: The Free Press, 1993.

NOTES

1. Japan Information Network, *Education: Statistics*, 2000,

<http://www.jinjanet.org/stat/stats/16EDUA1.html> (December 21, 2001).

2. Kaori Okano and Motonori Tsuchiya, *Education in Contemporary Japan: Inequality and Diversity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 65.

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