

Megan Anderson

### Comparative Analysis of the United States', Chinese, and Japanese Educational Systems

Three countries that consistently stand out as dominant leaders in the modern world are The United States, China, and Japan. Their strong economies, consistent advances in technologies, and dominant military organizations are highly influential in the world in which we live. To stay on top of the world in these areas, they each must continue to develop influential world leaders. The role of a country's educational system plays a large role in this responsibility. The following is a comparative study on the educational systems of The United States, China, and Japan. Focusing on the following areas: a.) extent of state support for education, b.) curriculum, c.) standard forms of instruction, and d.) aims of educational system, will give us a clearer picture as to how each country is molding the future leaders of our world.

#### Extent of state support for education:

There are a number of different ways in which to analyze a country's support for education; the most obvious being the amount of money in which they choose to allocate towards their educational system. According to The Global Educational Database, as of 2006, the educational expenditure as a percentage of total government expenditure for each country is as follows: The United States: 14.8%, China: 23.9%, and Japan: 9.5%. China and Japan are nations of a more homogeneous nature, whereas the United States, as reflected in their educational system, functions more as a heterogeneous nation, where individualized local control of education is valued.

Another measure of a state's support for education comes in the form of its support for its educators. According to the Global Education Database, teacher salaries as a percentage of the

total educational expenditure for primary and secondary education in the U.S. was 71.2%, and 79.5% in Japan (data in this category was not provided for China). Teacher salaries in China and Japan, when compared to those of the United States, are quite a bit higher. With higher teacher salaries seems to come a relatively higher degree of respect in the eyes of the community. As Cooke (2005) observed, Japanese teachers are well respected when compared to teachers in our country.

Similarly, in China, teachers are given more respect than teachers in the U.S. For example, teachers do not pay taxes on their salary, and they receive their own national holiday, Teachers Day, on September 29<sup>th</sup> (Haynes & Chalker, 1997). As an educator in the United States, it would seem that the U.S. government could learn a thing or two from China and Japan when it comes to state support for teachers.

### Curriculum:

Both China and Japan have national curriculums, where as The United States has standards implemented in a state-by-state fashion. Schools in the U.S. tend to focus on a liberal arts education, meaning that students receive a well-rounded education consisting usually of English, math, science, social studies, and electives like gym or kinetic wellness, music and art classes. Students in the U.S. do not begin to specialize in a narrower field of study until their second year of college. This is one aspect of U.S. education that varies greatly from other developed nations, like China and Japan.

In China, primary school curriculums consist of Chinese, mathematics, physical education, music, art, nature, morals and society and practical work classes. Another important part of the curriculum stresses the importance of teamwork, respect and selflessness, and these

topics are usually covered in more than one class. Math and Chinese are referred to as "The Big 2," as 60% of the allocated class time is devoted to the two subjects, and they are the only two subjects on final exams. Students in secondary education face another challenge in addition to being admitted to colleges and universities; at the end of each school year, students have to take entrance examinations to be admitted into the next grade. If students fail to pass the test, they may take the test again. Ultimately the students who are unable to pass the test are left unable to finish their education.

According to Cooke (2005), the Japanese believe schools should not only teach academic skills, but good character traits as well. A small number of hours every year are devoted to moral education in Japan's national curriculum. In Japan, there are very few comprehensive high schools (like there are in the U.S.), but rather 75-80 of high school students enroll in university preparation tracks. Most university bound students attend separate academic high schools while students who definitely do not plan to go on with higher education, attend separate commercial or industrial high schools.

#### Standard forms of instruction:

Standard forms of instruction play a huge role in the educational systems of each of these countries. Out of the three the United States has the least rigorous standards in comparison to the other two countries. In China, tests are administered at the end of every school year to determine whether students in one grade level have acquired the skills that they will need in the next level. If students fail this exam, they are have the opportunity to take the exam until they pass. This can be difficult for some students, and ultimately results in some students dropping out of the school system all together. College entrance exams are an even bigger deal in China. According to

Greenspan (2008) the testing period is a major event throughout the Chinese mainland. In Shanghai, government regulation has established “green protection zones” around exam sites where construction projects are suspended and traffic is redirected. Oral test questions are played out over the radio — and there are even stories of late students receiving police escorts to get them to the exams on time!

In Japan there is a similar stress on the importance of the entrance exams and standardized tests. Academic high schools, similar to universities, require rigorous entrance exams in order to be admitted. The best Japanese high schools are public schools that require these entrance exams. This puts an enormous amount of pressure on middle school students to get into a good high school. The reality is that a Japanese high school student’s future depends largely on the high school in which they attended, as many Japanese employers continue to base hiring decisions upon the prestige level of the educational institution a student has attended.

In the U.S., standardized tests are used to separate below average students, from average students, from above average students. Each state has different regulations for school tracking systems, and each local government has different regulations as well. This results in a wide variability between tracking systems across the U.S. In general, class composition in the U.S. is more homogeneous since students are placed in classes according to their ability level. Students sometimes choose which level they want to be placed in, but most of the time students are arranged into levels by the use of high stakes tests. Aside from standardized tests such as the SAT, in which colleges and universities use for entrance consideration, there is no national entrance examination on the high school, as there is in China and Japan.

### Aims of educational system:

Typically the educational systems of these countries have been stereotyped into two different forms of instruction; Eastern education is characterized by memorization, and math and science skills, and Western education is known for a more liberal arts focused system, where creativity is encouraged. According to Fiske (1987), Japan's education's goal is simply to convey knowledge from the teacher to the student, a concept of education that readily lends itself to measurement by standardized tests. Like the Japanese — who experimented with and then abandoned a policy of “loose education” because of its negative effects on standardized exams — the Chinese say they value creative learning, but will not accept any educational reform that sacrifices test scores. Students in China are taught that all questions have but one right answer and there is little room for debate and original thought (Greenspan, 2008). Both Japan and China's educational system's are not focused on promoting a child-oriented purpose such as discovering and developing the skills an individual child might possess, much like that of the United States.

## References

Cooke, J. (2005). A Comparison of Japanese and American Education Systems. *The Oregon Mathematics Teacher*. Jan/Feb., (14-16).

Greenspan, A. (2008). China vs. America? Learning Strategies in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. *The Globalist*, Aug 25<sup>th</sup>.

Haynes, R. M. & Chalker, D. M. (1997). World class schools. *The American School Board Journal*.

*The Global education database*. (2010, May 2). Retrieved from <http://ged.eads.usaidallnet.gov/data/>