

## THE AMERICAN EDUCATIONAL ESTABLISHMENT'S DEPICTION OF JAPANESE EDUCATION

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### **Introduction**

As one who has worked in Japanese education for fifteen years, I am familiar with the scholarship in the field. In addition to scholarly literature, during the years in which I have studied Japanese education, a steady stream of publications has appeared about Japan's schools in both the American popular print media and in k-12 education journals. How Japanese education is characterized in major American k-12 education publications constitutes the major research question of this article.

My interest in systematically analyzing how leading American education journals portray Japanese schooling was stimulated through both anecdotal experiences and reading several articles on Japanese education published in journals to which large numbers of American school administrators and teachers subscribe. When I speak about Japanese schools to groups of American teacher audiences locally regionally, and nationally, invariably I receive queries concerning pressure the Japanese educational system allegedly exerts upon students. Almost every teacher prefaces this sort of question with an exaggerated statement about how much stress Japanese students encounter in schools. Teachers also always ask questions on Japanese teen suicide that lead me to believe they think it is much more of a problem than is actually the case.

Some time ago I read an American educational journal in which a leading education author and nationally-syndicated columnist strongly implied that adolescent suicide was a major problem in Japan, much more so, in fact, than is the case in the United States (Bracey, "Asian and American Schools Again," *Kappan*, p. 642). In my judgment the manner in which the information on suicide was worded most probably imparted an inaccurate notion of Japanese suicide to readers. This particular article was not the first inaccurate account of aspects of journals with large circulations. Previously, I had read articles on juku and Japanese elementary schools that were also inaccurate. Were the mistaken allegations and content errors I encountered in earlier reading isolated

incidents, or were distortions and errors about Japan's schools widespread in the American educational press?

Specific research questions addressed in the article that follows include: Who writes about Japanese education in the American educational press? Do any particular Japanese educational—related topics resurface again and again? What is the tenor of the articles—are they positive, negative, neutral? And, how accurate is the American educational presses' depiction of Japanese education when compared to scholarly treatment of the topic?

### **Data Sources and Methodology**

Two educational journals, *Educational Leadership*, which is published by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, and *Phi Delta Kappan* (hereafter *Kappan*), which is the flagship publication of the Phi Delta Kappa Educational Fraternity, were selected as data sources. These journals both have large circulation and tend to be read by K-12 public education policy-makers as well as classroom teachers. *Educational Leadership*, which has two hundred thousand readers, has an audience consisting of a disproportionately high number of educational administrators, education professors, curriculum supervisors and school department heads. The *Kappan*, which has one-hundred-and-thirty-five thousand readers, is perhaps a more influential publication than *Educational Leadership*. While it has a smaller circulation, the *Kappan* is popular among high level school administrators—where it is commonly referred to as the “Superintendent’s Bible.”

A computer-search was conducted using the key word “Japan” for both journals beginning 1987 and concluding with the latest available issue (September 1999). 1987 was judged an appropriate beginning point for this study since 1987 marked the US Department of Education’s release of *Japanese Education Today*, (Dorfman and Carr), a ninety-five page monograph that was released to school districts throughout the US and served to stimulate a substantial amount of dialogue on Japanese schools. The search yielded a total of twenty-six articles (*Educational Leadership*—seven articles, *The Kappan*—nineteen articles) that contained content on Japanese education over the twelve-year period.

### **Who Writes About Japanese Education?**

Appropriately, in this context, “Japanese Education Scholar” is defined as an individual who has either published on Japanese education in journals such as *Comparative Education Review*, or *The Journal of Japanese Studies*, or has published books or monographs on the subject through university or scholarly presses. Of the seven articles on Japanese education appearing in *Educational Leadership*, three scholars wrote four of them (Harold Stevenson wrote two articles for the journal). Scholars in Japanese education were responsible for four of the nineteen articles that appeared in *Phi Delta Kappan*. Occupations of the non-scholar lead authors include: research psychologist and writer, free-lance writer, elementary teaching journal editor, educational administration professor, education professor, retired pension fund consultant, school superintendent, state legislator, counsel for congressional committee, graduate student, private company research associate, American English teacher in Japan, American teacher in Japan and American high school principal.

### **Major Topics**

Each article was classified as to what Japanese education topic or topics appeared in the piece. While authors of some articles addressed one topic exclusively, the majority of authors wrote about more than one topic. The four leading Japanese education-related topics that authors addressed were: Comparative US Standardized Test Studies (seventeen articles), *Juku* (ten articles), Rote Memorization and Low Creativity (seven articles) and Youth Suicide (six articles). Other authors wrote about (appearing three times or less) included: collaborative learning, elementary schools, *ijime* (bullying), pedagogical approaches of elementary teachers, the general role of high school teachers, teacher training and high expectations of Japanese schools.

### **Positive/Negative Treatment**

Articles were categorized as positive if most or all of the content of a particular article cast a favorable light on the aspect or aspects of Japanese education described in the article. If the opposite was true with an individual article then the article was categorized as negative. An article was categorized as neutral if its content neither positively nor negatively depicted Japanese education. Of the seven articles that appeared in *Educational Leadership*, four were positive and three were negative. Six of the nineteen articles that appeared in the *Kappan* were positive, eleven were

negative and two articles were neutral. Of the scholar-authored articles in both journals, six were categorized as positive, one was neutral and one was negative. Non-scholars in both journals were responsible for four positive articles, fourteen negative articles and one neutral article.

#### **Nature of the Accuracy/Inaccuracies**

If an article contained no content that conflicted with consensus scholarship among Japanese education specialists it was categorized as accurate. An article was categorized as inaccurate if the opposite was true. Seven of the eight articles Japanese education scholars wrote for both journals (four in *Educational Leadership*, four in the *Kappan*) were categorized as accurate. No non-scholars (three articles) writing in *Educational Leadership* were classified as accurate. Of the fifteen articles by non-scholars in the *Kappan*, three were categorized as accurate, and twelve as inaccurate.

Examples of inaccuracies are organized based upon the four leading Japanese education topics authors addressed in the articles.

#### **Comparative US-Japan Standardized Test Studies**

Authors made various inaccurate assertions while addressing comparative US-Japan test data. For example, *Kappan* columnist Gerald Bracey wildly exaggerated the academic pressure for Japanese children when he asserted that "...American students can beat the socks off their Asian counterparts if we are willing to: ...convince American parents that, when their children turn four, they should take them on their knees and tell them, 'You are big boys and girls now, so you need to start practicing for college entrance examinations,' ...and convince American students that, if they sleep four hours a night, they will get into college, but if they sleep five hours a night, they won't; they must study instead." (Bracey 1996: 128)

Another author explains the Japanese success on international tests by making similar incorrect assertions. He cites a colleague's belief that American test scores would improve if absent students' mothers came to school, took notes, and gathered their homework each day. (VanSciver 1997: 68)

Authors also make inaccurate statements regarding Japanese test performance in reference to Japanese student samples that were tested. For example, in a 1992 article on international math testing, the author asserts, "...structural differences in Japan and the US create substantial disparities

in the proportions of students enrolled in the final year of secondary school.” The author then points out that a higher proportion of US seniors are enrolled in high school than is the case in Japan. The author uses comparative US-Japan high school senior enrollment from 1967 as a source as evidence. (Jaeger 1992: 119)

Another inaccurate tactic (in my opinion) is author dismissal of the importance of US-Japan comparative tests. For example, an author of a *Kappan* article entitled “Notes on Japan from an American School Teacher” contended “...sixteen years as a teacher in public school classrooms convinced me that one good anecdote is worth one-thousand lesson plans and ten-thousand standardized test scores.” (Ohanian 1987: 361)

### ***Juku***

Studies indicate that twenty-four percent of Japanese elementary students, sixty percent of middle school students and thirty percent of high school students attend *juku* at some time in each respective educational level. At any given time thirty-five percent of all elementary and secondary students are actually enrolled in *juku*. (Cummings and Altbach 1997) Most Japanese elementary students don’t attend *juku* to “cram” for examinations but to take enrichment courses such as swimming and piano lessons. In “The Secret of Japanese Education” one author identifies *juku* as the key to Japan’s success. (Goya 1993: 128) The same author then makes the inaccurate statement that “...many parents enroll their children in an academic *juku* as early as first or second grade,” and goes on to assert that about one out of three elementary students receive supplementary lessons without mentioning that the majority of these lessons are in swimming, piano or English conversation. (Goya 1993: 128) Another author suggests that if the US desires to equal Japan’s educational achievements then they will need to design public school promotion exams in a way “...that most parents will feel obligated to send their children to *juku* three or four hours a day.” The author also facetiously recommends, “...that Americans provide second-language instruction for all *juku* students starting at age three.” (Nordquist 1993: 66)

While research indicates that Japanese students have mixed feelings about *juku* (Ellington 1992), several authors in this study describe the *juku* experience in entirely negative terms. For example, one high school principal, in a 1993 *Educational Leadership* article, characterizes *ronin* as “...students who have failed the college entrance exam—who litter the

pedagogical battlefield of this Spartan educational system.” (Pettersen 1993: 56) He neglects to add that almost all *ronin* eventually enter the university. The same author characterizes the philosophy behind Japanese *juku* as “...a nearly fanatic view of what our universities refer to as lifelong learning.” He goes on to describe Japan as “...an entire nation marching off to schools.” (Pettersen 1993: 58)

### **Rote Memorization and Low Creativity**

Scholars of Japanese education concur that rote learning is over-accentuated and that Japan’s schools seem to not facilitate creativity. However, authors of several articles in the two American education journals inaccurately distort this aspect of Japanese schools, and completely ignore the more positive characteristics of Japanese education. For example, one author warns that “Before we copy Japanese education, let’s make sure we understand that in Japan, authentic learning means mastery of memorized information, not experiential learning that prepares one for life.” (Nordquist 1993: 64) The same author inaccurately contends that memorization “...explains why they (the Japanese) are so good at math.” (Nordquist 1993: 66)

Authors, in discussions of rote memorization, often made the related charge that the Japanese educational system does not foster creativity. One author quotes travel-writer Paul Theroux’s concern that Osakans don’t jaywalk at traffic lights, “A society without jaywalkers might indicate a society without artists,” and then goes on to assert that American educators should ponder whether we want elementary schools without divergent thinkers. (Ohanian 1987: 367)

### **Suicide**

From the 1950’s until the early 1960’s the proportion of Japanese adolescent suicide rates relative to the cohort were higher than in the US; since then, the exact opposite has been the case. (Zeng and LeTendre 1998) In all six of the articles where suicide is discussed, authors either directly assert or strongly imply adolescent suicide is a greater problem in Japan than the US Government or international agency statistics are cited in none of the six articles. One author quotes another publication where a Japanese student asserts, “The Japanese government is responsible for the suicide of so many children,” in reference to the educational system. (Bracey, “Asian and American Schools Again,” *Kappan*, 1996: 642) The other five authors

simply assume readers know that there are higher rates of teen suicide in Japan. For example, the author of an article on “cram” schools writes, “In Japan, industrial need, not intellectual curiosity determines the number of university openings, thus the escalation in burgeoning “cram” schools, attentive education mothers, the suicides, and the countless exam prayer candles burning in the temples.” (Pettersen 1993: 58)

### **Conclusion**

Japan specialist Thomas Rohlen wrote, “Our public educational system is far more insulated by national and cultural borders than are our corporations, our military, and our scientific establishment. Left to its own devices there is little reason to think that American education would be inclined to look outside for answers to its problems.” (Cummings and Altbach 1997: 223) The findings in this study suggest Rohlen was quite correct in his description.

Scholars of Japanese education were responsible for only slightly over twenty percent of the articles in both journals. Almost sixty percent of the articles in the study negatively depicted Japanese education, and, more importantly, over sixty percent of all articles contained factual inaccuracies. The majority of authors in these leading American education journals attack Japanese education with little knowledge of, or regard for, accuracy.

A sociological question arises based upon this study. In the 1980’s American business was, in one respect, in a similar position to American public education vis-à-vis Japan. The American popular and print media unfavorably depicted American management practices when compared to Japanese ones. The response of American business was to aggressively study and attempt to learn from Japan. This study suggests an opposite response from the American public educational establishment.

A second question stimulated by this study is: Why do the American and Japanese public educational establishments appear to behave so differently regarding foreign practices? Japanese K-12 educational leaders appear to be quite interested in foreign approaches to schooling. Why does this not seem to be the case with their American counterparts?

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