

# Report on a comparison between Japanese and Canadian schools

Takafumi Shikano

## (1) Introduction

After inspecting the schools in the West in the late nineteenth century, the Japanese government decided to abolish their old educational system and adopt a French system. Then at the middle of this century, about 55 years ago, the Japanese educational system again underwent a transformation during the U.S. occupation. Nevertheless, Japan has maintained educational methods that are very different from those of the West.

On the other hand, influenced by England and the United States, Canada has developed an educational system rooted in her social and cultural diversity.

In this paper, I would like to discuss the difference between the two educational systems, and do so by concentrating on a comparison of senior high schools. First, I want to explain the characteristics of Japanese schools. Then, from a non-Western point of view, explore features of Canadian schools. As a conclusion, I will discuss what function each school system has in each society.

## (2) Characteristics of the Japanese Education

The most distinctive feature of the Japanese educational system is its uniformity. The number of elective subjects is very small, compared with that in Canadian high schools.<sup>(1)</sup> Why have the Japanese adopted such a standardized curriculum? The

pattern is mainly due to the special Japanese characteristic which sees her society as being highly homogeneous, with almost all Japanese belonging to the middle class.<sup>(2)</sup> Difference in the students' home environment is not as wide as that found in Canada. For example, the divorce rate is no more than three percent,<sup>(3)</sup> and the difference in income-range is narrow compared to Canada. Therefore, it may safely be said that Japan has every reason for making the students compete with each other under the same conditions. Making the most of this pattern of competition is prevalent in Japan. The educators can thereby enhance the efficiency for learning. This leads to the second characteristic: keen competition.<sup>(4)</sup>

In Japan, equality in schools simply means "competition on the same basis." Competition on this equal basis is highly valued. It is partly because, unlike universities in Canada, those in Japan have a rigid hierarchical structure in rank. It might be partly because Japan has a tradition of attaching more importance to paper-and-pencil measurement, which dates back to the eighth century when Japan introduced an examination system copied from the Tang Dynasty in China. Making the most of this severe form of competition skillfully, Japan has succeeded in developing a large number of excellent workers with high average ability. It is the main resource

Japan has. This is revealed by the results of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (I.E.A.) mathematics and science studies. Professor T. P. Rohlen of the Stanford University, having done extensive research on Japan's high schools, concluded that the average ability of graduates of Japan's high schools is comparable to that of universities in the U.S.<sup>(5)</sup>

### merits and demerits

It is important to consider the merits and demerits of the process of education in the Japanese high schools. From grade 10 to grade 12, the students in my prefecture usually take 40 classes a week, composed of 34 regular classes and 6 extra classes early in the morning. Four classes are held every second Saturday. Each class is 50 minutes long. Through digesting this heavy curriculum, students unconsciously acquire the ability to process information rapidly.<sup>(6)</sup> This is especially required in densely populated Japan where information is circulated swiftly and with the quantity of that information per capita being very large.<sup>(7)</sup> Moreover, extensive subject matter, especially in social studies and sciences, helps stimulate the curiosity of the students. This is a valuable asset to Japan. Dr. Gregory Clark, Australian ex-diplomat to Japan, says that the Japanese exhibit the highest curiosity to know everything they can in the world.<sup>(8)</sup> On the premise that if students plant seeds in the school days they will bear fruit after graduation, broad subject matter seems to be provided for students.

What do the Japanese overlook in the schooling system? I'd like to discuss the following two matters. The heavy curriculum mentioned above brings forth merits,

on the other hand, it barely leaves students enough free time. In other words, Japanese students cannot afford the time to think deeply about a specific matter. As classes, especially of social studies, center on textbooks, principal concerns for students are to memorize basic facts precisely and to comprehend the interrelationship between them. Therefore, they do not have time to read textbooks critically.

Dr. Kramer<sup>(9)</sup> said that the Japanese are apt to swallow printed matter without chewing. This, I think, has something to do with the instrumental method adopted in Japanese classrooms.

Second, it is important to discuss students' power of expression. Japanese teachers usually direct their students to write descriptions of their impressions, rather than to report on social problem. Therefore, students are not given opportunities to develop the ability to write logically and clearly in order to convince others.<sup>(10)</sup> Moreover, discussions are not used in classes that center on teachers and textbooks. Thus, students cannot enhance their ability in oral discussion, either. I am of the opinion that this is mainly because the Japanese, who live in a homogeneous society where there is considerable similarity in their way of thinking, haven't needed to acquire these two abilities.

### **(3) Characteristics of the Canadian Education**

Education in Canada is most characterized by its correspondence to the diverse society. Canada has two official languages and is made up of immigrants and refugees from all over the world, in addition to the native peoples of First Nations. Therefore, it is natural that its educational system should reflect the diversity of the society. To guarantee the diversity in

schooling means, in other words, to allow students as many choices as possible in the curriculum. Taking account of the vast area of Canada, to ensure equality of access to those choices<sup>11</sup> seems to be a permanent theme. In light of the small population and limited local finance of each school district, educators in Canada might find it very difficult to cope with these formidable tasks. On the other hand, because Japanese educators don't have to worry about these issues, they can devote all their energy to enhance the efficiency of schooling.

#### merits and demerits

We should now reflect on merits found in the Canadian educational system. Canadian schools, influenced by John Dewey, pay much more attention to fostering critical ability and developing thinking faculties. In classes, teachers urge students to have a critical mind and to ask questions without hesitation, which Japanese teachers don't try to do. These powers cannot be cultivated by a closely compacted and inflexible curriculum. Therefore, students in Canada take fewer lessons, and teachers are less bound to curriculum. In fact, Canadian teachers have wider discretion in their own lessons than do Japanese teachers. For example, some teachers in Canada do not use textbooks.<sup>12</sup> This picture contrasts with that of Japanese students, who usually remain mute and silent, only digesting the enormous amount of information given by teachers.

Second, schools in Canada have a stronger relationship with libraries. It is mainly because teachers stimulate students to use them in class. There are several big libraries scattered in my city of Fukuoka,<sup>13</sup> while Vancouver has many smaller libraries with

excellent librarians within easy reach of students. Thus, the library plays a continuing, frequently interactive, role in the education of Canadian students.

Third, Canadian students have the skill to express their own opinion or thoughts logically and clearly. Probably it is the direct influence of the instructional method which places much value on writing reports logically and debating.

What appear as weak points in the education system in Canada? A couple of them are the lack of basic knowledge and the lack of curiosity among students. The legacy for learners said;<sup>14</sup>

*"Many Canadians I met also expressed the view that we have been somewhat hesitant to realize the importance of schooling and the value of intellectual capital. Perhaps this has been a result of a long tradition of taming the frontier with our hands and earning our living in the basic resource industries. In any event, people spoke with conviction about a need to be excellent in what we do, to make better use of our intellectual resources, to be less dependent on others for ideas and innovations, to be more self-reliant and resourceful, and to be able to convert knowledge and ideas into opportunities for growth and employment."*

Since a principal objective for schools in Canada is to enhance the thinking faculty, teachers don't and can't cover subject matter extensively in classes. Besides, the fewer number of school lessons promote this narrowness. Hence, it doesn't seem to be possible for students in Canada to acquire sufficient basic knowledge. It seems to me that teachers in Canada educate students on the premise that, if they have a more enhanced thinking ability, they can apply and use it in a variety of situations. I wonder, however, how many students do

this after graduation from high school? As all the students will not become university professors, I believe educators in Canada should pay much more attention to making generalist students acquire fundamental scholastic ability in extensive fields for the post-industrial age. If schools fail to give students wider basic knowledge when young, they may not be able to appreciate or understand various things when they grow up. I am afraid that when they touch on what they have not learned at schools, they will simply feel it peculiar rather than be curious about it. Therefore, it's much better for students to be given wider subject matter to stimulate curiosity which itself leads to an enhanced desire for learning.

#### (4) Conclusion

For Canadian students, school life is only a part of their lives, while high school means the whole of Japanese students' life. Students in Canada enjoy themselves as individuals. On the other hand, Japanese students lead ascetic lives. Canadian schools help to produce self-determining and self-reliant people, while high schools in Japan are not charged with making finished citizens.<sup>(5)</sup> As there is a wide difference in situations surrounding the schools, it may cause misunderstanding to compare schools in the two societies without taking into consideration a school's function in a society.

In this paper, I have discussed characteristics including merits and demerits, of Japanese schools and of Canadian schools respectively. However, I have studied this comparison for only some months, so my judgments in this report may need correcting. Pursuing my research, I want to add new findings and to revise my opinions.

#### < BIBLIOGRAPHY >

- (1) *Curriculum in the Schools of British Columbia*, British Columbia Royal Commission on Education, Vancouver, 1988, pp.15-16.
- (2) Thomas P. Rholes, *Japan's High Schools*, University of California Press, 1983, pp.111-117.  
Kuniko Inoguchi, *The Emerging Post-Hegemonic System: Choices for Japan*, Chikuma Shobou, Tokyo, 1987, pp.140-160.
- (3) Thomas P. Rholes, *ibid.*, p.114.
- (4) Japanese teachers as well as students prefer a larger class, for both of them believe competition in a larger class helps achieve better learning. A class in a high school is usually composed of 40 students.
- (5) Thomas P. Rholes, *ibid.*, pp.320-326.
- (6) Cynthia Hearn Dorfman ed., *U.S. Study of Education in Japan*, U.S. Department of Education, Washington, 1987, p.35.
- (7) Later on, this must be confirmed by doing continuous research.
- (8) Gregory Clark, *The Japanese Tribe, Origin of a Nation's Uniqueness*, The Simul Press, Tokyo, 1977, pp.163-166.
- (9) He worked, as an assistant professor, for the Asian Center at the University of British Columbia in Canada.
- (10) Kanji Hatano, *Sekai no Gakko Nihon no Gakko*, Shougakukan, Tokyo, 1978, pp.180-186.
- (11) Barry M. Sullivan, *A Legacy for Learners: The Report of the Royal Commission on Education*, Vancouver, 1988, pp.193-198.
- (12) *Ibid.*, p.118.
- (13) The population of Fukuoka is almost as large as that of Vancouver.
- (14) Barry M. Sullivan, *ibid.*, p.7.
- (15) Thomas P. Rholes, *ibid.*, pp.267-269.

#### < REFERENCE >

1. T. Husen ed., *International Study of Achievement in Mathematics; A Comparison*

- of Twelve Countries*, vols 1 and 2, John Wiley & Sons, New York, 1967.
2. Comber, L.C., and Keeves, J.P, *Science Education in Nineteen Countries: An Empirical Study*, International Studies in Evaluation, no.1, John Wiley & Sons, New York, 1973.

抄録：

この論文では、日本とカナダの高校の(長所・短所を含めた)比較を行っている。

日本の高校を理解するキーワードは、uniformity(画一性)と keen competition(厳しい競争)である

が、この論文では特に、日本における競争の意味について明らかにした。なお、日本における高校教育の長所として「幅広い教養の付与」を、短所として「深く考え、それを論理的に表現する力の不足」を挙げている。

一方、多元社会カナダの高校の教育の強さは、カリキュラムの柔軟性と、学校教育における図書館のきちんとした位置付け及びその機能にある、と私は考える。弱さとしてあげているのは、知識への軽視である。

(福岡県立修猷館高等学校教諭)