

## Research Report

### Attitudes to the teaching of history and the use of creative skills in Japan and England: a comparative study

Yvonne Larsson, University of Cambridge School of Education, Richard Matthews, Stanground College and Martin Booth, University of Cambridge School of Education

#### *Introduction*

The American educational framework forms the basis of schooling in Japan - six years of elementary schooling, three years of junior high and three years of senior high school. Class sizes in junior high school are large by English standards - forty students per class is the norm - and instruction is teacher centred; that is, whole class teaching. Students engage in note taking for the purpose of passing the examinations which, certainly as far as history is concerned, is the regurgitation of factual knowledge. The use of small groups for instructional purposes is rare and student presentations are limited. Classroom proceedings focus on the teacher, who elaborates at length in a final lesson. The blackboard is used to enhance teacher explanation and to aid note taking by students. Few questions are raised by either teacher or students (Rohlen and Le Tendre, 1996).

The classroom teacher's time does not have to be spent on organisational routines or on classroom management as is the practice in many English classrooms (Booth *et al.*, 1995). Students, in Japan, are expected to move beyond being well socialised to the challenge of personal attainment in a competitive field of knowledge. To this end, school life is dominated by tests to enter an institution at the next level. Private coaching schools (*juku*) are active in the evening to aid students to reach the next stage of education. Although most students attend their local schools, there is the opportunity to compete for one with prestige (state or private). Examinations are viewed as a character building challenge and underlie the tendency to perfectionism in Japanese culture (Rohlen and Le Tendre, 1996).

Japanese society by ignoring its minorities both indigenous and immigrant, sees itself certainly at an official level, as much more more culturally homogeneous than does UK society. Families and class honour play a major part in Japan, with the ancient samurai notion of the way of the warrior (*bushido*) and its emphasis on loyalty, commitment and indifference to death and material goods, still having influence. Partly because of this, Japanese families invest enormous amounts of time and energy in promoting their children's educational success. Education occupies a significant place in Japanese children's lives and the schools aim to develop all pupils within the same educational framework. As a result there is not much attention paid to the innate abilities of learning and a differentiated curriculum (Cummings, 1980).

Although Japanese teachers develop their own teaching routines, they usually follow well established practice. The lesson plans are based on a set body of content knowledge that is organised in as precise a way as possible. The key concepts to impart and discuss are less central than in an English lesson plan, where in history, for

example, the status of different types of historical data, the nature and importance of continuity and change in reconstructing the past or the relationship of cause and effect are often focal teaching points. In Japan, what is important is the acquisition of facts as determined by the Ministry of Education's official course of instruction. Reliance on the text book is the key to knowledge and the acquisition of essential facts. The Japanese teachers' task is to present the knowledge in a time-tested and precise way. Students' perceptions are that sound knowledge of the facts will ensure their understanding of the key concepts. Exposure of the students, regardless of ability, to the same knowledge presented is an important feature of the Japanese understanding of egalitarianism or equal educational outcomes. Students are given the same basic content which helps to overcome the problems of weak teachers. Japanese teachers are well qualified and well respected. In this context, they are confident of the learning potential of all students. They believe everyone can achieve if there is determination by the students, parental support and appropriate guidance by the teachers.

The basic difference between the England and Japan is the characteristic collective learning environment of Japan and the more differentiated approach in English schools. Both English and Japanese teachers, however, endeavour to promote insight into topics and facilitate processes that are encouraged to cause change in the students' character development.

Japanese teachers are highly respected and are paid accordingly. Their salaries are competitive with those working in business or other professions. All of the teachers and head teachers interviewed at the three Yamanashi schools where the field work was conducted were male. The Japanese theory of teaching is perpetuated through frequent contacts among teachers and continuous sharing of information and practice; it is a constant process (Cummings, 1980).

The formal teaching of social studies (history, geography and civics) that occurs in the middle schools is explicitly cognitively orientated. The formal study of Japanese history is usually introduced in year 1 of the middle school (age 11 - 12). The time-line covers the period from 300 BC to the present. The main factual textual coverage is supplemented by a colourfully presented book with maps, diagrams, pictures, graphs and photographs purchased *by* the schools of the prefecture. The texts together present an open-minded, even progressive picture of Japanese society. Their strongest theme is the diversification of work performed *by* the people. The role played by women is small in most representations. Publicly sponsored history, fixed and undebatable, is very important in contemporary Japan; it is seen as a means of creating a cohesive society.

As a Japanese writer puts it:

The art of recalling the past has developed very differently in Europe and East Asia. Whereas Western historiography has since the time of Herodotus and Thucydides been centred around histories written by individuals for individuals, East Asian historiography has developed a historical culture pivoting on the shared, more public historiography of the 1st century Chinese historian, Ban Gu.

...in East Asia, history forms the important foundation for human existence. It has to be said that the role of the past in East Asia is extremely important compared with its role in the Western cultural sphere. People are seeking in history some kind of basis for their own existence.

...the past is seen as the most trustworthy "mirror on mankind". What is being sought from public historiography is not a history, but the history, the reliability of which is, people undoubtedly believe, guaranteed by non-commercial governmental editorship.' (Sato, 1997)

School text books fall into this category. The content must conform to government guidelines; schools choose from a limited number of textbooks. They are published by seven main educational publishing firm and are supplied free to schools (Morris-Suzuki 1997), (Yamagiwa, 1997).

In England and Wales, history in years 7, 8 and 9 (ages 11- 12, 12-13 and 13-14), is compulsory, as it is for the five to ten-year-old age groups. Themes to be covered are given in broad outlines by the revised National Curriculum in history, first introduced in 1990. In 1995, it was shortened and simplified, particularly with regards to the assessment procedures which are not nationally prescribed. The History National Curriculum emphasises the debatable nature of historical discourse and a range of sources to be interrogated as evidence. However, the increased emphasis on acquisition of knowledge has resulted in widespread textbook use in schools. There are a number of independent publishers producing educational texts; history teachers do have a choice of books which they can use with their students. Most teachers use history texts as a resource in that a range of sources are presented on a topic, allowing students to think of issues from the different perspectives presented. There is therefore a measure of autonomous learning by the students. The skills for example of the use and evaluation of a range of sources of evidence also promote a critical approach to learning (Slater, 1995). Though Japanese teachers do have a limited range of resources, they do not encourage students to interrogate them.

### *The comparative history research project*

An earlier comparative study looked at the historical skills and knowledge of Japanese and English students aged between 12 and 13 in Junior High Schools in Yamanashi and in secondary comprehensive schools in Cambridgeshire (Booth *et al.* 1995). The data seemed to suggest that the Japanese students had a wider and deeper historical knowledge base than the English and showed as good if not better skill in handling historical documentary evidence, despite the lack of emphasis on this in the teaching. The discrepancies between the batteries of tests given in Yamanashi and Cambridgeshire prompted some misgivings about the soundness of the conclusions and led to further research with Japanese and English students of similar age where far greater emphasis was placed on the comparability of the research instruments and methods employed. More than 145 students in three Cambridgeshire comprehensive schools and more than 90 students in three Yamanashi Junior High Schools were tested. Three history research instruments were used: a Lickert-type questionnaire on the respondent's views on the nature of history; a similar questionnaire on the

experience of history teaching methods in the classroom; and a test on the use of three historical photographs and a cartoon all dealing with life for black Africans in South Africa in the 1970s. The results of the students who took these questionnaires and test were set against standardised scores obtained by administering a non-verbal intelligence test produced by the English and Welsh National Foundation for Educational Research (Smith & Hagues, 1993). It is suitable for students aged between 7 years 3 months and 15 years 3 months. The questions test the ability of students to recognize similarities, analogies and patterns in a series of unfamiliar shapes or patterns. For example, students have to decide which one of six shapes given below a large oval belongs with the two given in the oval. The questions look at spatial ability; 'there are no reading requirements and pictorial material is not used, as understanding of pictures often requires culturally-specific knowledge' (*ibid.* p.2). The test questions therefore are largely culturally free for Japanese and English students.

In addition, Japanese and English history teachers involved in teaching the year groups tested also completed the two questionnaires. A small sample of the Japanese and English teachers and students were interviewed.

#### *Ages and intelligence test scores*

The ages and intelligence scores of the sample are given in the table below: The difference between the mean ages is significant at the .025 level. There is significant difference between the mean IQ scores of the individual schools, reflecting the ability of one of the three Japanese junior high schools. School 4, which is closely associated with the education faculty of Yamanashi University, in particular scored highly. The school is well-respected by parents. By contrast, English school 1 draws its students from a large city and has to compete with more competitive local schools.

*(Table 1 follows below)*

**Table 1 Intelligence quotient scores and average ages**

Country and school	Number of students	Mean IQ
England 1	62	84.5
2	48	106.7
3	46	106.8
<i>Average age 12.9</i>		
Japan 4	29	117.0
5	34	113.4
6	29	111.2
<i>Average age 13.2</i>		

#### *Attitude towards history and history teaching*

The attitude towards history as a subject questionnaire contained fourteen statements each of which had to be responded to on a four-point scale : strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree. Three examples of the statements are given : 'History is

constantly being rewritten'; 'history is there to teach patriotic virtues'; 'history is there to teach debate about the past'. Significant differences for the responses occurred on the scores for eight of the fourteen statements. English students were more strongly supportive than the Japanese of the view that the story of the past is constantly being rewritten; they were more likely to believe that history is created from sources of evidence and that it consists of many stories, each dependent on the teller and reader; learning history is about the accumulation of facts about the past and that historical discourse is concerned with debate, a view which is widely subscribed to in the United Kingdom. By contrast, Japanese students felt that history is a single fixed story of the past and should mainly be concerned with the history of one's own nation, views which echo the Japanese view of the public and incontestable nature of history and the role it plays in creating a strongly cohesive social fabric (Sato, 1997).

The second questionnaire dealt with methods of teaching history. It contained twenty statements to which students had to respond on a four point scale : always, frequently, sometimes, never. Three examples of the classroom activities they might have encountered are as follows : 'Describing and explaining the past to students'; 'watching film or video'; 'writing creative pieces of work (e.g. plays, diaries, letters). Significant differences in responses occurred on the scores of thirteen of the twenty statements.

English students were more likely to ask their teachers questions about the past; video and film featured more frequently in English history lessons than in Japanese; and on the five statements which focused on the examination and discussion of different types of historical sources of evidence (written, visual, objects, music and oral) the English students claimed a significantly higher frequency than the Japanese on four of them. Only their response to their use of music as evidence was not significantly different from the response of the Japanese. On each of the two statements dealing with written work - writing formal essays and writing creative pieces of work (e.g. plays, diaries, letters) - the English students were claiming significantly higher frequencies than the Japanese. The English also claimed a significantly higher frequency of copying time-lines of historical events. The Japanese students, on the other hand, gained significantly higher frequency scores on only three of the statements : their teachers asked more factual questions than the English teachers; the students were far more likely to take notes from the black board or dictation; they were more likely to use their history textbooks on their own.

The questionnaire were also given to twelve teachers in the East Anglian schools, to ten in the Yamanashi schools. Their view reflected the views expressed by the English and Japanese students. For example, all the English teachers strongly agreed or agreed that 'history is constantly being rewritten'; all strongly agreed or agreed that 'history is there to teach debate about the past' (four out of the ten Japanese teachers disagreed with this statement). With teaching methods, the English teachers put a heavy emphasis on the examination and discussion of sources of evidence.

In brief, English students and history teachers see history as a debatable story of the past created from a range of sources of historical evidence, whereas for Japanese students history is a subject to be learned by heart. As students at one of the three Japanese High Schools said when asked what they had to do to get a good mark in

history "You must study the important points and underline them in your text book. You must try to understand what the teacher says and memorise the facts."

### *History pictures test*

How far are these attitudes to the subject and classroom practices reflected in the scores on the history pictures test? The test consisted of three photographs and a cartoon reflecting life in the Republic of South Africa in the 1970s, a topic which none of the Japanese or English students had studied at school. The first photograph showed a black person's shack in a run-down slum in Grahamstown, Eastern Cape; a child plays amongst the rubbish. The second showed the interior of an overcrowded school classroom in a black township; the third, a segregated stairway - blacks only to the left, whites only on the right. The cartoon was of a white South African policeman wielding a truncheon and about to strike a black man whom he has by the scruff of his neck.

The students were asked to undertake two written tasks. The answer sheet was headed as follows: 'An opinion: "Black people in South Africa in the 1970s were treated badly by the white rulers"'. Students were then invited to write a story about what life might have been like for a black school student in South Africa in the 1970s using information from the four pictures. The second task asked: 'How full and accurate a story were you able to write based on these four picture based these four pictures alone? Explain your answer'. A levels of response marking scheme was drawn up, modified in the light of the English students' responses and then agreed by both the Japanese and English teams.

For question 1 ('... write a story about a black school student ...') the following levels were used:

Level 5 (10-8 marks) 'Uses information from all four pictures plus sophisticated inference'

Level 4 (7-6 marks) 'Uses information from all four pictures - higher mark for inference'

Level 3 (5-4 marks) 'Uses information from three pictures - higher mark for inference'

Level 2 (3-2 marks) 'Uses information from two pictures - higher mark for inference'

Level 1 (2-1 marks) 'Uses information from one picture only - higher mark for inference'

Level 0 'Nothing - or inaccurate information'

For question 2 ('..how full and accurate is your story....') the following levels were used:

Level 5 (10-8 marks) 'Sees pictures as provisional/partial, only presenting one side - and gives details'.

Level 4 (7-6 marks) 'Sees pictures as provisional/partial, only presenting one side - but little substantiation to back it up'.

Level 3 (5-4 marks) 'Recognizes limited nature of evidence (e.g. 'only four pictures given'); questions value of pictures and/or uses other information'.

Level 2 (3-2 marks) 'Sees pictures as absolute proof.'

Level 1 (2-1 marks) 'Very general - no recognition'.

Level 0 'Nothing of any substance'.

Table 2 below gives the scores for question 1.

*Table 2 (question 1 scores 'write a story')*

Country/school		Number of students	Mean	SD	SE
England	1	62	4.61	2.7	.34
	2	49	4.67	1.8	.26
	3	46	4.65	2.0	.3
Japan	4	29	5.45	2.41	.45
	5	34	4.18	1.88	.32
	6	29	6.13	2.23	.41

Table 3 below gives the scores for question 2

*Table 3 (question 2 '... how full and accurate ...')*

Country/school		Number of students	Mean	SD	SE
England	1	62	2.534	1.96	.25
	2	49	3.43	2.42	.36
	3	46	2.48	2.01	.3
Japan	4	29	3.37	2.23	.41
	5	34	1.65	1.548	.26
	6	29	2.52	1.27	.24

With question 1, a total of fourteen students in Cambridgeshire (9 per cent) achieved level 5 with scores of between 8 or 10. Only one student scored the highest mark of 10. All provided evidence of interference and most displayed empathy as well.

Thirteen Japanese students (14 per cent) achieved level 5. Two Japanese students scored the highest mark of 10. The response of the later (girl) Japanese student is as follows, indicating her capacity to empathise even though empathy is not taught :

"My name is Tom and I'm black. It seems that in the past blacks were treated badly by whites. Dad says the houses were little tin shacks in really wild parts. Dad says he was full pf mischief, a bit like me, so it was hard for hi every day in a small area not being able to play or do what he wanted. Oh, that's right he said the schools were terrible too. I wonder what it was really like ? 'Hey, Dad!' Dad had just at that time got back. 'Yeah, Tom, what is it?' 'What were schools like around the 1970s?' 'Uh? They were terrible. 100 to 200 people in a small room, desks and chairs were small, it was really crowded out. Slow coaches would sit on the floor. It was cold and winder was really the worst. You propably wouldn't last the winder, I expect'. 'Huh, anyway Dad, changing the subject there, when you wanted to play

couldn't you sneak into the white areas and play in secret?'. 'Of course not. If you were found by the police you would be arrested, beaten and have some real rough treatment, I can tell you'. 'Gosh, that's nasty'. 'I should say so'. 'Darling Tom, your Mum's just off to do some shopping OK?' 'OK mum. Ah, that's another thing! Hey Mum how were the trains? Could you ride them?' 'Naturally we would ride them, after all you need the trains to do the awful work. But we couldn't ride with the whites, we rode in trains that were falling to pieces, for non-Europeans only'. 'Gosh, that's unbelievable. Hey Dad explain a little better. Why is there peace now?' Um, well, .....

By contrast her response to question 2 was brief.

'I don't know. I don't know much about the blacks' part so I wrote what I imagined from the photographs and pictures. I think that some of it is right (matching reality) and some of it is wrong (mistaken). However, I think it clear that the blacks lead an almost unbearably hard everyday life'.

In spite of the statistically significant difference between the IQ scores of the Japanese and English students, there is no such difference between the overall average scores of the Japanese and English students in their responses to the history picture test, question one (means of 5.2. and 4.64). Calculation of correlation coefficient, standard IQ with the scores for question 1, gave a value of .16, indicating that the scores are largely independent of each other

Most students found the second task appreciably more difficult. Forty two Cambridgeshire students (27 per cent) scored between 0 and 1 (levels 0 and 1). Four students gained level 5 (3 per cent). Two Cambridgeshire students with IQs of 137 and 140 respectively scored level 5 (9 marks). Two with lower IQs (104 and 113) also scored level 5 (9 marks). The Japanese students with little experience of a wide range of sources often floundered, in spite of their significantly higher IQ test achievement. Thirty two students (35 per cent) scored between 0 and 1 (levels 0 and 1). Only two students (2 per cent) achieved level 5, each scoring 8. The overall average means for the history picture test , question two are 2.48 (Japanese students) and 2.8 (English students), a difference which is not statistically significant. Correlation between standard IQ scores and the scores for question 2 show slightly greater relationship than for question 1 with a coefficient value of .24.

The correlation results for the history pictures tests and the IQ scores lend some support to the earlier findings (Hudson, 1967) of high level IQ scores and relatively poor showing in open-ended tests. The suggestion of accuracy in IQ tests and convergent thinking has not been disproved by the results. The divergent thinkers on the other hand are more likely to show hostility to apartheid. The responses support this.

If the Japanese teachers want to make a change to their students' attainment in history however, there will be no alteration until there is a change of attitude about the nature of history, the way it is taught and the manner in which it is assessed. So long as history is regarded as a fixed, public story of the past and examinations are seen as a means of assessing the amount of factual knowledge memorised, then Western and



Japanese approaches to the teaching and learning of history will remain significantly different. Similarly English teachers may wish to put more emphasis on the acquisition of knowledge.

The utilitarian, didactic view of history was also the norm in British schools before the 1970s. A number of factors in the sixties and seventies produced a revolution in the teaching, learning and assessment of history. It was partly a feeling that the triumphal celebration of a single version of Britain's past was no longer in tune with the multicultural population, the raising of the school leaving age and the increase in the number of all-ability secondary comprehensive schools; the tired old narratives and didactic methods of teaching seemed out of kilter with the new generation of students. In any case, a group of Western historians were radically reconceptualising the nature and writing of history. From an educational point of view, the work of Bloom and his associates and the writing of Jerome Bruner had a profound effect. Bloom with his taxonomies of educational objectives drew attention to the fact that too much of education was concerned with the low cognitive abilities of comprehension and recall; Bruner in his seminal book *The Process of Education* stressed the fundamental importance of teaching an understanding of the underlying principles that give structure to subjects in the curriculum (Booth, 1994).

These issues gave rise to the highly influential government-funded Schools Council History Project (1972) which was charged with creating a new history curriculum for pupils aged 13 to 16 in England and Wales. Historical debate and the use of a wide range of sources were at the heart of the Project; empathy came to assume a key role in historical understanding; history was seen as a unique discipline, "a distinct way in which our experience becomes structured round the use of accepted symbols" (Hirst, 1974 quoted Booth, 1994). And the Project team believed that the only way that such notions of history teaching and learning could change the face of school history was through the public and school examination system.

The past twenty five years have therefore seen a revolution in history assessment in the England and Wales. Examinations present students with a range of sources; questions are asked which demand empathy and inference, not merely factual knowledge. And classroom teaching and learning reflect this in the majority of schools. If the Japanese seriously wish to reform the teaching and learning of history in their schools, then attitudes and assessment procedures need to alter. That Japanese junior high school students have the capacity to use sources material creatively is beyond doubt, as the Anglo-Japanese history research project reported in this article indicates. Until however there is a change of heart about the nature and assessment of history and the critical role that empathy and the creative though critical reconstruction of the past can play, no real progress will be made. Japanese history teaching will remain obsessed with the recall of factual knowledge centred on a mostly male dominated past.

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## Summary

This paper makes a comparison between the teaching and learning of history by 12-13-year old students in Japan and England. The research is based on field work conducted in 1995-1996 in three Japanese junior high schools in Yamanashi prefecture and three English comprehensive schools in Cambridgeshire.

First the author sketches the Japanese educational structure and looks at the teaching of social studies in the two countries. Then he sets out the basic assumptions of a recent comparative study on the development of historical skills and knowledge of Japanese and English students. Next to this starting point, the research team prepared a questionnaire to investigate the pupils attitudes towards history and history teaching.

English students and history teachers seemed to consider history as a debatable story of the past, created from a range of sources of historical evidence whereas Japanese students were inclined to contemplate it as a subject to be learned by heart. History was far more regarded as a fixed story of the past.

The author believes that if the Japanese wish to reform their factual knowledge centred teaching and learning of history, they have to face the critical role that empathy and the creative reconstruction of the past can play in history instruction.