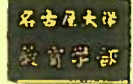




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Compulsory Education in Japan A Norwegian perspective

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*A student, in uniform, from urban and modern Tokyo
washes her hands at an old temple in Kyoto*

Preface and Acknowledgements

This paper presents a brief description of Compulsory Education in Japan, from a Norwegian perspective. To some extent I have tried to make the study and the presentation comparative. However, it is not fully consistent in all details. Therefore I gave it the subtitle: "A Norwegian perspective". The study is based on literature, official statistics and personal observations and experiences I made during my five weeks visit to Japan in the spring 2000. The method used is influenced by a socio-cultural approach. What I choose to call attention to is not necessarily what the Japanese think is important or somebody from another culture would see. However, I have also used quantitative data. These data are selected from national statistics from the Bureau of Census and The Ministry of Education in both countries. Therefore they should be fairly valid. My personal observations and experiences are, however, limited to a few schools in Chubu and Kinki region only.

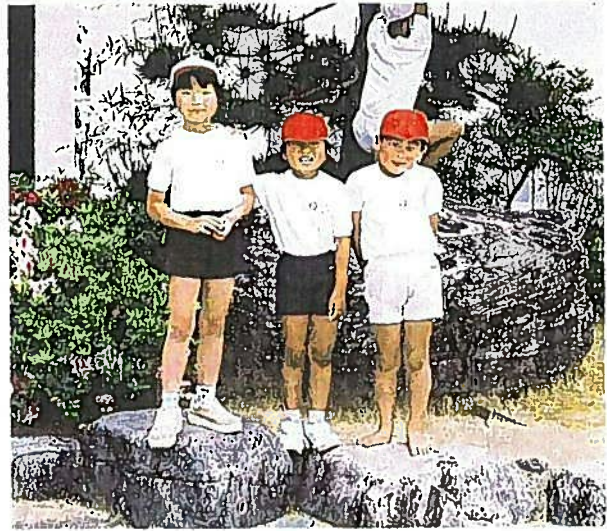
I want to express my gratitude to Nagoya University, Telemark University College and Norwegian Association of Authors (NFF) who made my visit to Japan possible. Especially I want to thank Ass. Professor Yokoyama, Etsuo at Nagoya University who was my host in Japan and arranged the program for me. I also want to thank Professor Kitagawa, Kunikazu who was my host in Osaka. Kitagawa also guided me to Kyoto, which gave me some very interesting knowledge about socio cultural aspects of Japan society and culture.

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1. Introduction

Diligence and hard work are qualities the Norwegians in general seem to associate with the Japanese. Discipline and limited freedom for the individual are also characteristics that can be heard and observed about Japan education in Norwegian media. Some Norwegians even like the idea it is time to “import” some discipline and order from the Japanese schools to the Norwegian schools. Finally, some Norwegians prefer to call attention to the idea of a childhood not so very happy because they have heard the number of suicide among young people in Japan is very high.



The Norwegians seem to have the image of the average Japanese as a friendly, but a rather shy person who smiles often, always obedient to authorities and therefore often bow the head and nod when saying “yes”. During my visit to Japan I experienced the connection between nodding the head and the “yes” might some times be confusing in the conversation, because a nod don’t necessarily means “yes”. Many Japanese just don’t seem to be aware they do so.

When asked the Japanese tend to say they are not religious. However, at least some of their characteristic behaviour seems to be deeply rooted in both Buddhist and Shinto religion. Buddhism, that was introduced in Japan in the Nara period between 700-800AC, teaches for instance about the relation between the teacher and student: “The student shall always stand up and bow his head when the teacher comes in, wait for him, follow his instructions, not deny to do him a favour and listen respectfully to his teaching”. In many ways these traditions seems to be a parallel to the puritan and pietistic movement that introduced compulsory education in Norway in 1739AC.

Order and harmony were qualities in the philosophy of Comenius who wrote *Didactica Magna* about 1630, the first great European book about the art of teaching. In Japan this time of history is talked about as the Edo period when Japan chose to be very much isolated from the rest of the world. In Shinto and Buddhist religion and the social system in this period I think the roots of Japan education today probably has to be found. At that time Japan had a two-class social system. Education within the ruling Samurai families was both academic and practical and aimed at personal cultivation as well as government and military control. Education for the common people was primarily training through apprenticeships aiming at skills for a decent everyday life.

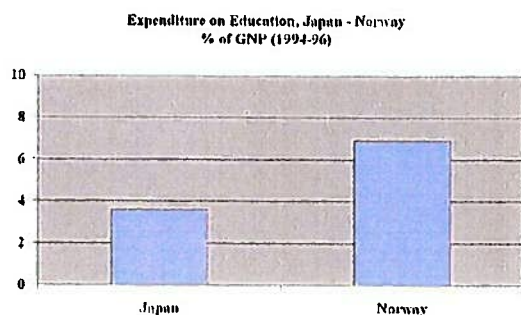
Order and harmony were the most significant qualities I experienced when I visited Nakautchi Elementary School in Mino, which is located in central Gifu Prefecture. The students were playing outside when I arrived. They smiled friendly, nodded the head and some waved the hands too saying “Konichiwa” or just “Hayo”. At the entrance I had to take off my shoes and put on slippers before I entered the shining floor, and then I met the Principal, Takeshi Ishigami.



2. Legal basis and organisation

Both in Japan and Norway the Law of Education provides basic aims and principles to education. However, the Japanese Fundamental Law of Education is not so comprehensive as the Norwegian Education Law, “Opplaeringsloven”, that was approved in 1999. Therefore Japan education is also regulated by separate laws dealing with issues like organisation and management, social education, local administration and the system of local boards of education. To some extent this is true in Norway too by the Law of Local Municipalities, “Kommuneloven”. The local municipalities in both countries manage compulsory education.

In both Japan and Norway cabinet orders are made to enforce the laws. In Japan the ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture publishes ministerial ordinances, notices and also the national curriculum and the courses of study. Therefore it can be said that both countries have an egalitarian school system that is not so common in other countries.

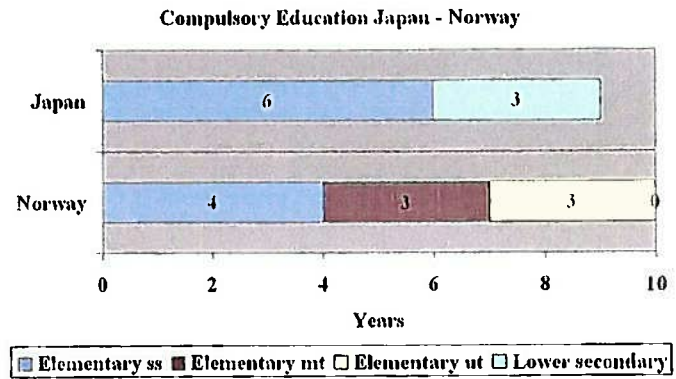


Japan spend about 3,6% of the GNP on education. So far I have not found any specific figure for compulsory education only. Norway spend about 6,9% on education and the average in the European Union is about 4,2%. I don't think it is possible to use these figures as quality indicators. One reason for the differences could be that the school system in Norway is less effective than the

Japanese system. Another reason might be the fact that operating schools in Norway is more expensive due to the scattered population, big rural areas, many small schools and expensive transportation. Small schools also means less students in the classes, relatively more teachers and higher costs on salaries, which is the highest cost factor in any system of education.

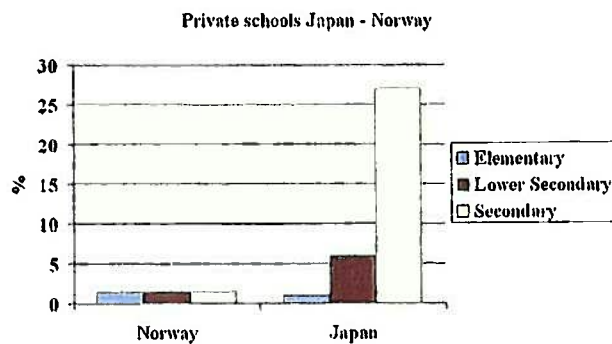
In Japan the parents do pay some money both in public and private schools. Based on official statistics I have estimated that the Japanese parents pay between 500-1500\$ per year. That's is not very different from what the Norwegian parents have to pay. However, private schools are more expensive.

After World War II the Japanese educational system was changed according to the American model 6-3-3-4 systems nationwide. That means 6 years of elementary education, 3 years of Junior High school or lower secondary education, 3 years of secondary education and 4 years at College or University.



In Norway the compulsory education is 10 years of elementary school divided into three departments or levels. The 6 years of elementary education in Japan are similar to the first 7 years called “Barnetrinnet” in Norway. 3 years of Lower Secondary Education in Japan is similar to the last 3 years called “Ungdomstrinnet” in Norway.

One argument some times used in Norway to explain the high expenditure on education is related to private schools. However, I was surprised to find very few private elementary schools in Japan. In Japan children must attend 9 years of compulsory education from age 6 to age 15. In Norway it is 10 years between age 6 and age 16. In both countries almost all elementary students enrol in national schools. Only about 1% of the Elementary schools in Japan are private. That’s about the same as in Norway. However, about 6% of the Japanese students in lower secondary school enrol in private schools. That is higher than in Norway were still only about 1,5% enrolls in private schools.



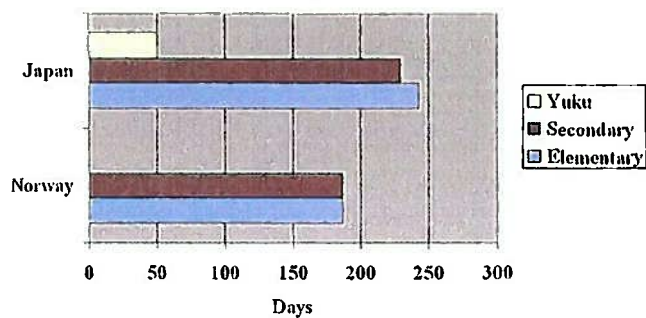
In Japan secondary schools and higher education more often tend to be private schools than in Norway. When the students leave compulsory education, about 27% of the Japanese students continue in private secondary schools. However, the private schools are supported by the government, which pays about 50% of the expenditure. In

Norway the government pays about 85% of the costs in private schools.

In Japan students has to pass an entrance examination to enter any school beyond compulsory level. In Norway they don't as they since 1994 have the legal right to continue in 3 years of secondary education. Therefore there are a lot more focus on entrance examinations and tests in Japan than in Norway.

In Japan many students go to Juku after school. Juku is extracurricular activities on a private basis as well as private classes on regular school subjects. There seem to be several reasons they do so. Some go to Juku simply because they enjoy to go there to be with the friends. However, most of the students go to Juku because their parents

Length of school year Japan - Norway



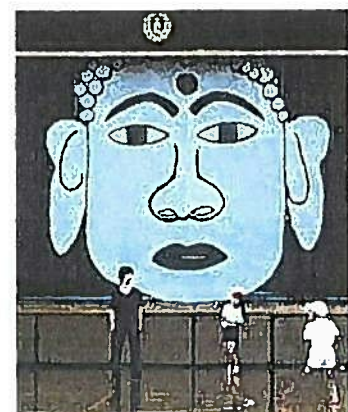
want them to be better skilled in school subjects or as a kind of organized homework. Another and important reason is to prepare for entrance examination in order to enter a more prestige school in the future. This tradition is unique in Japan and makes the competition very hard.

The school year in Japan starts in April and lasts 230 days. This is much longer than in Norway where it lasts only 187 days. In Japan there are also a lot more students than in the Norwegian classes. The average in Japan is often 40 students while the limit in Norway is 30 students, most often even lower.

3. Content

The overall aim of Education in Japan and Norway seems not to be very different. Both countries claim by law to promote full development of personality. Japan education shall aim at qualities like “striving for the rearing of the people, sound in mind and body, who shall love truth and justice, esteem individual value, respect labour, have a deep sense of responsibility and be imbued with an independent spirit as builders of the peaceful state and society”.

The most significant difference between Japan and Norwegian Education is related to religion. Japan has no state religion while the Norwegian constitution still has a link to Christianity. In Norway Christianity also plays an important role in moral education though also other religions are equally implemented in the subject by the last reform in 1997. Like modern Norwegians the Japanese seem to confess several religions. However, Buddhism and Shinto are the most common and many Japanese even seem to confess and practice both of them. Buddhism was a kind of state religion in the Nara period about

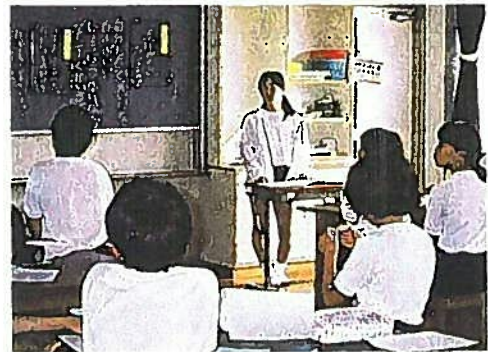


700 AC, but that was a long time ago. However, today many Japanese classes visit historical sites related to religion, like Daibutsu, the great Buddha in Nara. On the picture you can even see the Daubatsu made by elementary students in Gifu as a preparation for their school excursion to Nara. It was made as teamwork and a puzzle out of many small peaces and put up in the gym hall.

Instead of religion Japanese students have moral education and social education. In both countries each school organizes its own curriculum on the basis of the national course of study, taking into consideration the actual condition of the community. In Japan the three main areas “subjects”, “moral education” and “special activities” are to be covered in the local curriculum.

3.1 Social education

Modern education must be relevant for the society outside the school, said the principal at Nakautchi Elementary School in Gifu. Therefore he wanted to improve his school through social training and closer relation with the local community. As far as I could see the school had a program and a school calendar that reflected relevant activities according to his idea. The grounds he gave for doing so were rapid change in society and family structure today.



When I visited the school in May and June I could observe quite some use of group activity, discussions and also subject elements gathered from the local area. Both in mathematics, science and social science I could see activities related to the season of the year, like planting rice in the springtime. I could also observe a lot more group activity than I had expected. One class was divided in groups. The students studied and discussed dilemmas about living in urban versus rural areas. June is also the month for school excursions and some students studied and prepared their visit to Nara.



Between 1315 and 1340 o'clock every day the students cleaned their school. Music, Wiener waltzes, was played from a central play station and the music could be heard from the loud speakers all over the school while they did the job. The teachers guided and helped the students and checked weather the job was done well or not. The students smiled and laughed and seemed to enjoy the job fairly well and, as far as I could see, everybody participated. The students had different jobs in turn and they worked in groups. Activities like serving lunch and cleaning the school seemed to be part of social training and integrated with the subject Life Environment. In this way they learned about environmental issues in a practical way, and about how to handle waste. In Norway we tend to learn about the problem of waste in a theoretical way. In this Japanese school they also seem to learn how to do it in practice every day. I am afraid this tradition would be very difficult to introduce in Norway, though I think it would be a good idea.

Japan has a nation wide school lunch program. The purpose of this program is both to give the students a nutritious and well-balanced meal, as well as to help them acquire a better understanding of nutrition, good eating habits and social values of a meal. The school lunch program is well organized in the schools and the local government is responsible for providing the food to the school in a proper and hygienic way. In the elementary school the lunch was prepared and organized by the students and also a part of the social training at the school.

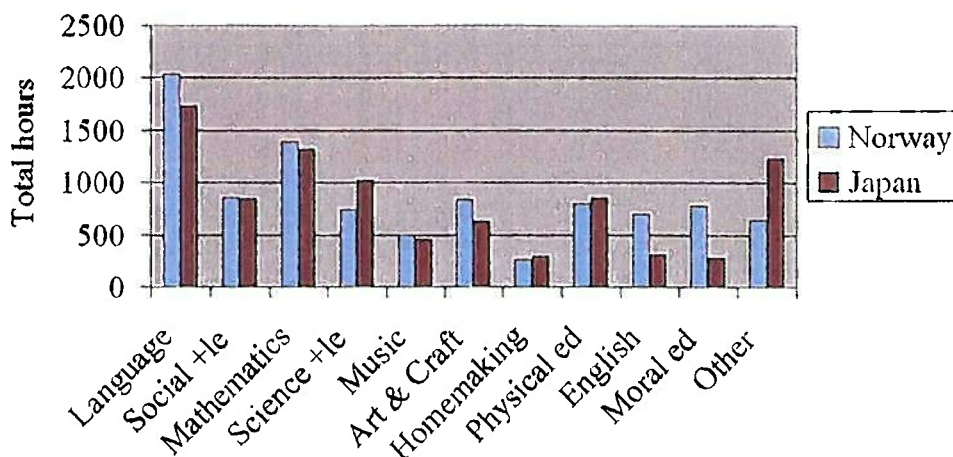


I was served school lunch twice, once at the elementary school and once at a secondary school. Both meals tasted very well and comprised rice, soup, fish, noodles, milk and also a cake. The parents have to pay the majority of food expenses. I was told the parents had to pay about 4000 Yen a month for the food. That means about 300 Norwegian kr., which is only about 2\$ for one meal. In Norwegian schools they do not have a lunch program. However, most elementary schools distribute milk for the lunch bag the students bring from their homes. Some Norwegian schools, mostly secondary schools, also have a cantina where the student can buy lunch. The average price for a regular lunch in the cantina would be about 3-4\$.

3.2 The subjects

Even though Norway has 10 years of compulsory education and Japan only 9 years, both countries have about the same total amount of hours. The reason is the Japan school year is longer. There are no very big differences in the type of subjects, or in the amount of hours spent on the different subjects.

School subjects Japan - Norway
compulsory education



The Norwegian schools spend more time on native language and mathematics than the Japanese schools. The fact the Japanese schools spend less time on mathematics is probably a surprise as it is

documented through international research the Japanese students do very well in both mathematics and science. However, the Japanese schools spend more time on science than the Norwegian schools. Religion or moral education is also quite different. Norwegian schools spend more time on Christianity and Religion as a means of moral education, while the Japanese schools have moral education only.

English and foreign language seems to be given little priority in the Japanese schools. Today Japanese students start to learn English in the 7th grade. This is very late. Since 1997 the Norwegian students start to learn English in 1st grade. I am not sure what is the reason for this low priority. I asked some educators about it and some answered they were afraid the kids would be confused if they had to learn two languages very early and before they had learned their native language well enough. However, it seems like school authorities in Japan have recognized the dilemma. Now Japan discuss to put more emphasis on foreign language too. One argument they use seems to be globalisation the need for more communication across national borders. I personally also experienced the ability to speak a foreign language was not very good neither in the schools nor in the society in general. This fact made me quite a little surprised as I have always thought of Japan industry as very international oriented.



In *mathematics and science* Japanese students do very well on international comparative tests. Therefore I wanted to study science and technology education. In the West we tend to believe science education in Japan is very much based on facts, drills and also very much teacher oriented. However, this seems not to be true. In contrary to Norway even the lower grades had practical experiences on the lab and the labs were very well equipped. Even in physics they had relevant equipment and did experiments. In biology the school had a lot of equipment and different kind of plants, fishes, clams and other species from the real world. These arrangements were both used as part of regular classes as well as means of playing for the students. The students seemed to love taking care of it and keep it nice and clean and in well order.

Elementary schools built in Norway thirty years ago used to have a science lab. Unfortunately, today many of these labs are used for other purposes and the interest for science in the Norwegian schools are very low. However, in Japan the science laboratories are still in tact and used for the purpose they were meant. The Japanese students still learn to do experiments and to work in the science laboratory.



The students seem to get in touch with basic principles and procedures in a very systematic way. Also in the laboratory the students work in groups. Four students share one workstation. The station has a sink with hot and cold water, gas, towels and some basic equipment. From cabinets they collect the necessary equipment they need for the experiments, like they do in many Norwegian schools too. The



students do experiments in biology, chemistry and physics and they also have fairly adequate equipment. Physics is may be the weakest point in Norwegian education. In the Japanese lab I could se equipments like: balance, gears, power supplies, measuring equipment, transformers, lenses, optical fixtures and electric fans.

Technology is not a specific subject as part of compulsory education neither in Japan nor in Norway. However, technology is an important topic in modern education world wide today because new technology always affects our individual life as well as our life environment. Therefore it is interesting to identify how technology education is carried out and how it is implemented in the regular subjects. However, first I think it is necessary to say some few words about what is technology. In the Norwegian curriculum technology is mentioned quite often and it is given a very broad definition.

First of all technology is ways of doing things. In that sense we can talk about old technology as old ways and modern technology as modern ways of doing things. Second it deals with ways of communication and cooperation. For instance, in Japan as well as in Norway mobile phones and technology for communication is very popular. Third technology is most of all processes, the tools that go



with the process. Finally we also have the products. My impression is that in Japan technology generally is defined in a more narrow way and very much related to the tools and products. However, let me use an example: The Kanban system developed at Toyota. From the Norwegian perspective the Kanban is a type of modern technology because it was a complete new philosophy about how to

run the assembly line. Kanban is a new way of doing things though it is not mainly related to some physical tools, but it is an idea that has to be turned into practice by those who do the job.



In Japan technology education is very much related to Art and Craft, which is differentiated into Fine Art, and Industrial Art in Lower Secondary School. Industrial Art seems to put very much emphasis on skilled training and in making things which have a long tradition in Japan. In Norway technology education is more diffuse and associated with both Science and Art and Craft in particular. Both subjects are supposed to

play an equal role. However, In Norway the Art and Craft subject has changes somewhat away from skilled training, like it used to be in “Sloyd”, and more towards creative Fine Art which is a trend.

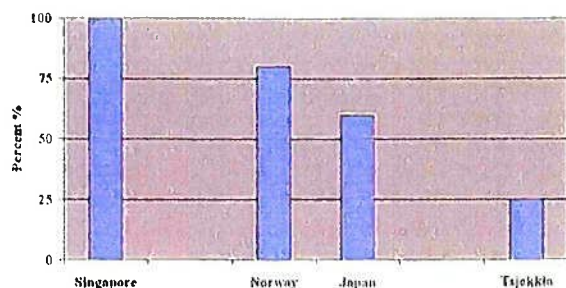
“Plug the seven holes of waste”, says the teaching of Buddha. From early age in the school Japanese students seem to learn that Japan has few and little natural resources so reuse and to optimise the use of materials are important. That’s also a philosophy in industry. The small pictures below show how the students at Showa Junior High School learn to transform the same can waste into a new product.



Information and Communication Technology is the basis for modern society, or what we tend to talk about as the Information Society. Mobile phones are already very popular among young students in Japan as it is in Norway. In the Japanese schools they have computer labs and Internet very much the same way as the Norwegian schools. Statistic shows that Norway and Japan is in the middle stratum when it comes to the student’s access to Internet in the schools.

In Norway the philosophy is to implement information technology in almost all subjects. In Japan the strategy seems to be a little different. Science and mathematics are mentioned specifically.

Students connected to Internet (SITEES 1999)

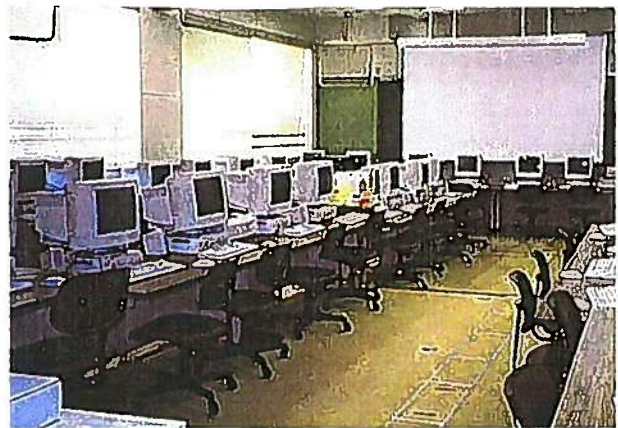




The Elementary school I visited in Gifu used drill programs in mathematics and word processing in social science. They also had Internet and the principal told students used Internet to collect information in ways very like we do in Norway. They did not seem to have the problem that the students visited pages and information no so very adequate for the schools. At least they claim so.

Web technology is about to be just as popular in Japan as it is in Norway. At Showa Junior High School I could observe very nicely made Web pages made by the students. The content was about a school excursion and you could also see the copies on a notice board, very nicely put up and arranged.

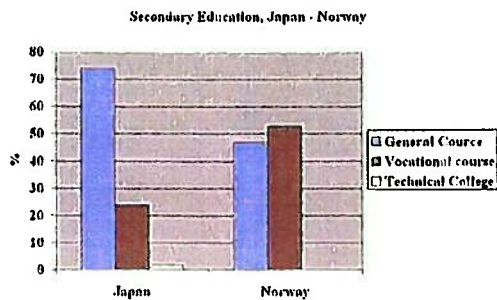
The equipment and the infra structure used in Japanese schools are very similar to what is used in the West. I had expected to find more Japanese technology. However, IBM standard computers, Windows NT networks and classical worldwide Windows Office software were the most common. There was one difference to observe though. The Norwegian strategy has been to have a couple of computers in the regular classroom rather than in specific rooms. In the Japanese schools I visited computers in the classrooms were quite rare. Instead there were computer labs, often with 40 or 20 workstations so that a full class could be there at a time.



4. Evaluation and testing

Scheduled tests, and also standardized tests, seem to be more common in Japan than in Norway. In Norway the students in elementary school, grad 1-7, do not get grades and they are not ranked, but in Japan the students do. In both elementary schools and secondary schools I could observe they were talking about the “average score” in the different subjects compared with other schools and also the “national score”. The Japanese testing system indicates they put more emphasis on subject matters and on evaluating the student ability and progress than the Norwegian schools do. However, the biggest difference between Japanese schools and Norwegian schools is preparations for entrance examinations. In Norway entrance examinations are very rare. In Japan entrance examinations seems to be the way of life!

5. Transfer to secondary education



Secondary Education is neither compulsory in Japan nor in Norway. However, in both countries about 98% continue in secondary education for about three years. The Japanese students have to pass an entrance test, the Norwegian students don't. Since 1994 the Norwegian students had a legal right by law for three years of secondary education.

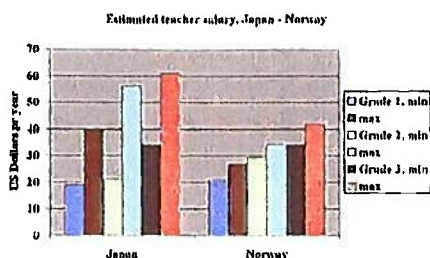
In Japan most students continue in general courses while the Norwegian students almost equally divide into general and vocational courses. Japan also has five-year technical colleges that can be entered directly from compulsory education (9th grade). However, they are very few, most of them are national and the total number is about 65.

6. The teacher

Japanese teachers are well educated, highly respected and fairly well paid. However, they work very hard, they have a lot of students, their vacation is short and the school year is a lot longer than in Norway. In elementary schools about 89% of the Japanese teachers have a four years bachelor degree, which is about the same as it is in Norway. About 60 percent of the Japanese elementary school teachers are women. In



Norway the figure is higher, about 75% and the trend is even less male teachers. In Japanese Junior high schools the figure is lower, about 40% women and 60% men. In both Japan and Norway the elementary school teacher teaches all subjects. The teaching methods, at least in the Elementary school I visited, were more modern and student as well as group oriented than I expected from what had read about. There also seemed to be a lot of empathy and good relation between the teachers and the students. However, in higher levels of the education system the methods seem to be more traditional.



In Norway the teachers are ranked and paid on the basis of their education and the amount of years in school. In Japan the system is very different. The Japanese teacher has to take an appointment examination conducted by the prefecture. There are three different certificates and the salary varies a lot more than in Norway, also based on individual pay.

7. Conclusion

This study indicates that compulsory education in Japan and Norway are not as different as we tend to believe. The subjects and the amount of hours spent on each subject are almost the same. The Japan curriculum does not include religion. Instead Japan has moral education. In Norway moral education is very much related to the subject Christianity and Religion. In Japan Junior High schools have Industrial Art, which indicates they prepare for vocational education earlier. Norway spends relatively more money on education than Japan, but it is hard to say this makes a difference in quality. However, there are more students in the Japanese classes. The Japanese schools seem to promote more order, discipline and respect while the Norwegian schools put more emphasis on creativity and individual freedom. Foreign language seems to be the weakest subject in the Japanese schools, while classical science topics are the weakest in the Norwegian schools. From a Norwegian perspective the entrance examination system in Japan appear to be very rare and more or less the way of life. The testing and motivation philosophy seems to be influenced by the Jesuit schools that were introduced in Japan in the middle of 1500. However, the most important question remains: What is a good school for the future society? May be both school systems need to be improved by more creativity and freedom for the individual student in the Japanese schools, and more order and system in the Norwegian schools?

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