Abstract:

When we think of the Japanese school system we usually think, “Oh, they are Japanese, and therefore Asian, they must be smart” but we usually don’t know very much about the actual system they went through. We don’t know anything about how that system was developed; we clearly have no reason to judge why it is or even if someone is smart or not. When I first was wondering about what I would do my project on, I quickly came to the decision that I wanted to do it on the Japanese education system, but after that I had a hard time choosing what part I actually wanted to do it on. I did some research and came across a quote that forced me into wanting to talk about the history of the Japanese school system as well as some beliefs that are thought about now by actually Japanese nationals. So in this paper I started off with the earliest known Japanese schooling establishment that was established by feudal lords for their samurai in the Edo period. I then skipped a couple centuries and started talking about the Japanese system in the 21 century. I discuss, in depth, about prewar education and then post war education. Once I get up to around the 80’s I shift gears and start talking about quotes that I found, as well as interviews that I performed with two Japanese college students.

After I analyze the quotes that I used from my research, and my interviews, I then give my opinion on the Japanese school system, ending with whether I believe that the system is still working or not.

The Edo Period can be termed as the start of the education system in Japan. During this time period local feudal lords established fief schools for local samurai which in turn made every samurai literate. Local farmers began to send their children away to temple schools for basic knowledge, such as reading, writing, and counting. By the end of the Edo area attendance to schools was high in larger areas, and respectively lower in rural areas. Thusly, because of this the Edo area is known as the start of the Japanese Education system. This is because we first see acceptable learning environments established for the purpose of teaching others.

The Meiji government established compulsory education for the primary and secondary education for the elite. Basically meaning that if a student wanted to enter into primary school they could, but they could only enter into secondary school and high school if they were among the elite. In 1872 the Japanese Ministry of Education established a four year compulsory education ordinance for children from ages 6-14. This was established to produce a “rich county and strong army” that would equal the western countries. By 1875 41 percent of boys and 18 percent of girls were enrolled in 25 thousand elementary schools throughout Japan with an attendance rate of 74 percent. In 1875 the enrollment rate was only 35 percent. But between the years of 1885 and 1910 the enrollment rate rose from 49.5 percent to an astonishing 98.1 percent. The two things that affected enrollment rates drastically were gender and social standing. So if a female from a lower class family wanted to enter school it was still unlikely for her to do so. Until 1918 when universal enrolment rates finally reached women and children from lower income families.

Only a small portion of elementary school students entered into secondary education and then moved onto high school and college. The majority entered the work force working for family businesses or to two year schools. At this time the secondary education schools were split into three groups: The previously mentioned two year higher primary school, the 5 year secondary schools for boys and the five year secondary school for school for girls. As the enrolment rate into primary schools approached closer and closer to 100 percent, the enrolment rate into secondary school in 1915 went up to 11 percent for males and 5 percent for females. Bye 1925 the numbers for enrolment into these five year secondary schools were; 6.4 percent for males, 10 percent for females, .4 percent males and .7 percent females went to normal schools. Half of males and one third of females enrolled in higher elementary schools. 3.6 percent of males went to vocational schools, while 2.2 percent of males and 4.8 percent of females went onto unnamed miscellaneous schools.

If a male did not follow the school path they usually entered family business such as agriculture and forestry. In this time period the percentage of males that fallowed this path was 22.5 percent. Also, 11.5 percent worked in manufacturing. The Jobs a female could have if she didn’t follow the school path were: 33.2 percent family businesses, 21.5 percent agriculture, 16.5 percent manufacturing, .1 percent sales, 1.1 percent apprenticeships, 1.8 percent domestic services and .6 percent midwifery.

By the 1930s the numbers of students that went onto secondary schools were; 20 percent for males and 17 percent for females. The five year schools for females taught them how to be good wives and wise mothers. Although, the numbers between urban and rural areas ranged exponentially; In Nagoya, 57 percent of males and 50 percent of females are recording of continuing onto to five year secondary schools as early as 1925. In 1936 it was recorded that students in Tokyo that were from a middle class social standing were likely to have better grades and more likely to continue on to secondary educational schools than students from families that whose parents worked as manufactures, farmers and retailers. Poverty forced many of these students to quit school and enter the work force after primary school.

Higher education during this prewar era was allowed available to the elite class. In 1877 Tokyo University was founded in order to compete with the “Western scholars”. Tokyo university was the first imperial university to be founded in Japan by 1915 2 percent of male students and .1 percent of female students entered into higher education. In 1918 the term “University” was given to other national, prefectural, municipal, and private professional schools. These schools were able to gain university status if they added preparatory courses for high school education. Because of this options to follow the higher education path became more available to students. By the 1930s enrollment into higher educational schools had risen to 6 percent for men and 1 percent for women.

From 1893-1894 supplementary vocational schools were established for graduates of primary school who chose not to move onto secondary educational schools. Supplementary vocational schools offered courses in reading, writing, accounting, and practical courses in agriculture, industry and commerce. By 1923 1,024,774 students, 72.9 percent boys, took courses from 8,299 teachers at 14,975 schools.

In 1941 Public schools became “National People’s schools”. The students were taught how to be dedicated to the Emperor, they were also taught to fight the war for the Emperor. In National text books, in Emperor was “deified” meaning that he was shown to be a “Living god” or a descendent of the gods. In 1934 history textbooks, the creation of the Japanese Nation was thoroughly portrayed, as well as the “first” Japanese Emperor, or Emperor Jinmu. In was in a 1940 National history textbook for elementary school children that Emperor Horohito Was referred to as a “Living God”. This deifying of the Emperor continued all throughout he war until the end.

In a 1943 text book, this quote, “We have to study hard … to become good subjects and to do our best for the sake of the Emperor” was stated. I think this quote is very interesting. From the start of the quote we see the importance of the Japanese education system in 1943. Even though the logic behind it was slightly brainwashing the population at the time it is still slightly interesting. First off in the quote it states, “We have to study hard, to become good subjects” which hints at the fact that if a person does not study hard they aren’t a good subject. Personally I feel that this is hinting at past Japanese wandering samurai or rounin and also present Jobless and school less Japanese criticizes, or also rounin. Here in this quote we can see to portrayals of Japanese society. “Rounin” defined by the dictionary is “Master less samurai, Unemployed Person, and High school dropout.” Previously I mentioned that the first schools that were established were in the Edo period and they were for samurai to learn and become smarter. Next as we know, school started to become more and more popular throughout the Meiji Period until present date. Now I believe that the connection between the Past rounin, and the present rounin is the “studying” part. It is said that a Rounin samurai was a samurai that was wandering around without a master, so during the Edo period when the connection between the Masters and the ronin was weak, if the samurai was displeased with how he was treated he could leave his master and become a rounin. The term “rounin” was used as a term to define a samurai without a master, which is why I think that the term “rounin” is used to refer to a person in the Japanese society that is neither going to school, nor has a job. Historically, upon the death of their lord, the samurai were supposed to commit oribabra seppuku, or ritual suicide, because without their master’s permission they were unable to perform any other tasks. Thus they became unemployed. Now, we see students that exit college but do not find Jobs nor go onto to college, and same with college students, when they leave college they do not find a high paying job. Tying this back to the quote: “We have to study hard… to become good subjects.” The “subjects” part is the part that is referring to the rounin, previous and present, and the studying part is obviously refereeing to what was given to the samurai by their “masters” ad what is also given to the students by their “masters” or the Japanese system. If a subject goes against the system they turn into a wondering, master less subject. In other term, they become bad.

By 1944 boys in Higher Elementary school were subjected to compulsory military training. Ueda National School launched the “Must win Education”. This had students memorizing the “Declaration of War” and the “Imperial Rescript for Soldiers”. The students also took military training and helped with community organizations to support the war. “Children recited, “Do not take the humiliation of being prisoners of war. You should rather die to avoid the humiliation of being prisoners of war…”’ The students were taught between 1941 and 1945 that the emperor was a living God, and that it is honorable to die for the Emperor and the country. At the end of the war in 1945 the labor force experienced shortages and students from higher elementary schools through universities were forced to work in factories.

War time education:

Immediately after the war the Allied forces abolished the militaristic wartime education system, censored military script in textbooks and suspended all courses that taught ultra-national and imperial doctrine. An American model of the school system was put into place, and at the end of a month, the 27 “progressive” American teachers submitted a blue print for the post war education reform. This was in 1947.

 Comparisons with the united states:

“The United States, recently has been performing less well than their counterparts, so they have returned to teaching the basics in education.”

* “Education has clearly lost any meaning in Japan except for studying for one set of one set of test.” (Foster 17)
* “I feel that Japanese teachers are not only there to teach students but to teach them how to be human,”
* “When I was in a high school, I wanted to major in science after I enter a university. I told that my teacher, but she said I was not good at science and math, so I should give up it.”

At this moment in the paper I want to start discussing the Japanese education system in depth regarding the above three quotes. Previously in this paper I have been historically listing off the Japanese system, and how it developed from the Edo period through the end of World War Two, but now I would like to switch gears and discuss the thoughts of the Japanese system, first to researchers, and then to two Japanese students that I interviewed about their experiences in the system.

The first quote about is my main reason for writing this paper, when I read this quote I knew that I would be writing my paper about the Japanese education system. Foster writes about the education system and how that it has become just a preparation system for “Exam hell.” Exam hell is a two day even and is for the entrance exam into college. Most students study their entire live for this exam and, “May feel that it is upon them to uphold the family honor” according to Foster. I thought that this was a rather interesting look into the Japanese mind. Most if not all Americans, when deciding to enter college right after high school, take the SAT and ACT. These two exams were our equivalent to the Japanese entrance exams in Japan. From what I have been hearing recently most colleges are no longer looking at the exams, even though most of them require them for placement, but a different placement test can be taken when the student is accepted into the school, and if a student has good enough marks, the school does not require these tests be taken. According to Foster some student’s said “We have to learn everything we’re learning here before we even enter college” and “this school is nothing more than a testing facility”. When I read this I was utterly surprised about how the Japanese system was run, and the students’ beliefs about the system. One of my friends, a Japanese student said(in broken English), “When I was in a high school, I wanted to major in science after I enter a university. I told that my teacher, but she said I was not good at science and math, so I should give up it.” Mentioning the fact that she said this in broken English has a point. She, right now, is studying abroad in American, and though her English speaking is incredible, her writing is still somewhat lacking. Now we can give excuses for her and say it’s the system, which actually what I am going to do.

 “English education starts in the first year of junior high, and continues until the third year of high school. It focuses on writing and reading, but neglects speaking. Furthermore the Japanese Ministry of Education allows only a total of 1000 English vocabulary words to learned, and all the textbooks must be screened by the Ministry.” This alone is enough to talk about the way that English is taught in Japan, and to talk about the Japanese education system. Most teachers that are teaching in Japan were trained to teach it through only reading not by speaking, but being able to understand a language completely and to hear the mistakes comes with speaking. Through speaking and learning a new language, and this go for all languages as well, the language needs to be spoken so that the person learning can hear if anything sounds weird, that way when they are writing they can go back to their writing, and in their writing they will not make the same mistakes.

Secondly, returning back to my friends quote, she said that what she really wanted to study in college was sciences, but her teacher said that she was not good enough to study in math and science so she should give up. I thought that this was incredibly shocking. In America, when a student want to go into something that is difficult for them the teacher will tell them they should reconsider, but they would never tell them to give up. After talking to this friend I felt that the system she had to go through was entirely different than that I my own. I was beginning to agree with the quote that I had previously read by foster. I wanted to talk to another friend and get his opinion about what he experienced during school. He told me something that made me feel better about the Japanese system. “I believe that it is not the Japanese system that is the problem, it’s not the teachers either; it’s the students. It is entirely up to them to learn what they are learning, and to fully understand it as well.” This quote struck me a little bit more than I was expecting it to. The depth of his thoughts and his obvious admiration for his teacher when he said, “one of the teachers in my high school had every one of the students mesmerized; he told us story about places he had been to and stuff that he had done. That’s what I think the Japanese teacher represents and what they teach, they teach their students how to be human.” To me this was something very powerful. From the beginning of my research I had only been reading and hearing contradicting ideas about teachers and the education system. But my friend’s simple truth was what struck me the most. It’s always up to the students to learn what they are being taught. We can be taught by terrible teachers, as most in all high schools these days tend to be. Or we can be taught by teachers like my friend had, and these kind of teachers are very rare. But it is ultimately up to the student to learn what they are learning. My first friend was told that she should major in science, but she did not like her teacher’s opinion and decided to work harder. My second friend learned how to truly be “human while in high school and because of that I think the Japanese system works.