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Birkner, Martin

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The Education System of Japan

Martin Birkner

マルティン・ビルクナー

(人間発達環境学研究科・特別研究学生)

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1. Introduction

Like many other countries, Japan has undergone many changes over the course of its history. Just as the economy, politics and society have always had to adapt to changing circumstances, so too has the Japanese education and school system (Drinck, 2017, pp. 84-85).

The country is now one of the countries in the world with the best PISA results (Drinck, 2017, pp. 83-84; Maehara, 2014, p. 116; OECD, 2018).

Despite of scoring high in international comparisons of education levels, the Japanese education and school system faces current challenges. The demographic change as well as a work overload of teachers are two examples of challenges faced by Japan and will be highlighted below.

2. The Japanese School System after World War II

Japan's current school system has its origins in the period after the Second World War. After Japan's capitulation and its ties to the United States of America, the American school system had to be established in Japan in 1947 with the "Basic Law of Education".

In contrast to Germany, where responsibility for education lies with the federal states, in Japan it is centrally managed by the MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology). The Japanese school system has four levels - the six-year elementary school and the three-year middle school are compulsory for all pupils. Compulsory schooling is free of charge for pupils (Drinck, 2017, p.89). This can be followed by a three-year high school and a four-year university (DAAD Education System Analysis, 2017). The system can also be summarised as a "6-3-3-4" school system, which is illustrated in Figure 1 by Maehara (2014, p. 117) (Drinck, 2017, p. 89).

In contrast to Germany, there is no repeating of grades during the compulsory schooling period, which means that every pupil is automatically transferred to the next grade level during the compulsory schooling period. In Japanese primary schools in particular, the focus is on strengthening a sense of community, and the teaching of virtues such as perseverance,

diligence and perseverance plays a major role in everyday school life (Drinck, 2017, p. 90).

Figure 1. Sketch of school system in Japan

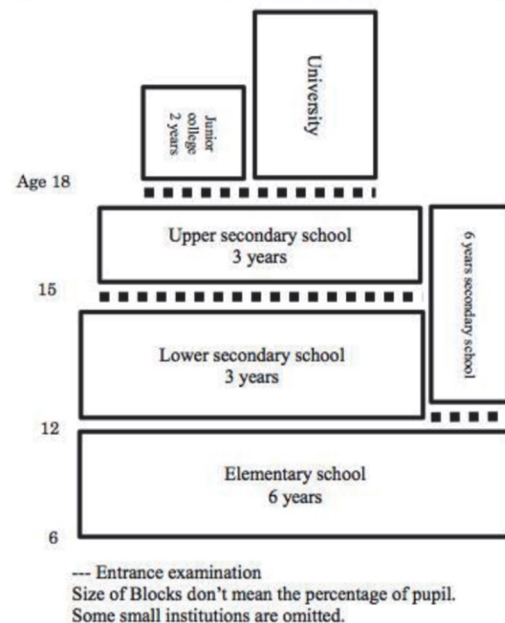


Abbildung 1: Skizze des japanischen Schulsystems (Maehara, 2014, p.117)

In addition to the school system described in the outline, it should be mentioned that the introduction of dual vocational training, as it exists in Germany, was never planned for Japan. After those entering the labour market are employed by companies in Japan, they are trained on the job while they are working (Drinck, 2017, p. 89).

As Japan relies economically on well-educated specialists, is dependent on them and also produces them through high educational motivation on the part of the Japanese population, places at Japan's colleges and universities are always in high demand. This high demand creates competition among applicants. In order to obtain one of the coveted university places, it is necessary to have received a good education at a high school that is considered "good". However, in order to be accepted at a good high school, it is necessary to have attended a junior high school that is not inferior. The background to this is the prevailing Japanese belief that socially recognised positive character traits such as diligence and perseverance

are formed in a demanding educational environment. Anyone who has gone through the relevant education must have developed these character traits. This way of thinking leads to a focus in the education system on entrance exams rather than final exams. This phenomenon, known today as "exam hell", can still be observed today (Drinck, 2017, p. 90; Maehara, 2014, p. 124).

The individual pressure and widespread competition associated with exam hell has led to the emergence of a private education system, particularly since the 1970s/80s. In addition to the public educational institutions described above, cram schools, known as "juku", were established. Pupils attend these alongside public schools in order to be able to perform as expected, but this leads to constant fatigue, exhaustion and social conflicts such as bullying and violence towards classmates and teachers (Maehara, 2014, p. 133), as well as an alarming increase in the suicide rate and a decline in family ties (Drinck, 2017, pp. 90-91).

3. Selection of Current Challenges the Japanese Education System faces

3.1 Demographic Change

Demographic change generally refers to the change in a population structure. It is a process that continuously changes the size, distribution and structure of the population (Feifel, 2015, p. 19). Not only personal decisions such as marriage play a major role in this process, but also environmental factors as well as political conditions and decisions.

Demographic change in Japan is progressing steadily and is characterised by a low birth rate combined with a high life expectancy and a low immigration rate (Feifel, 2015, p. 21). This is one of the most important social developments of our century and is characterised by increasingly significant shifts in population structures. Not only in Japan, but also in other countries worldwide like Germany, this process poses a number of different challenges. Not only can it have socio-political consequences, but it can also cause macroeconomic problems. In Japan, however, the change caused by demographic change is particularly advanced and intense (Feifel, 2015, p. 31).

However, demographic change is not progressing evenly in all geographical regions. For example, it depends on the choice of location. The majority of all school leavers who decide to study are located in urban centres, which will lead to further consequences of demographic change in rural regions (DAAD-Bildungssystemanalyse, 2017, p. 5).

3.2 Work Overload

The Japanese school system is characterised by an enormous

workload that goes beyond the actual teaching workload. A teacher in Japan can hardly escape this workload.

Co-operative management imposes a lot of additional work on the individual teacher, which is checked by the strict control of the Ministry of Education, which also monitors strict adherence to the curriculum (Shimahara, 2001, p. 95). As a result of these factors, the majority of Japanese teachers do not leave the school building before 6.00 pm and therefore have one of the longest working hours of any teacher in the world with over 50 hours per week (Sato & Kleinsasser, 1996, p. 809). Furthermore, the high average class size of 30 to 40 pupils has a negative impact on the stress management of Japanese teachers. Due to the rather irregular working hours, stress symptoms and burnout phenomena spread among teachers, which can also affect the quality of teaching. However, Japanese teachers are said to have a high level of discipline and a remarkable sense of duty, meaning that sickness rates among teaching staff are low. Only around a seventh of teachers work part-time. This is characterised by significantly more difficult framework conditions (fixed-term contracts, lower salary, annual school changes) than full-time work (Sächsischer Lehrerverband, 2022).

To become a teacher in Japan, students need to study usually for four years (in exceptional cases two years at a junior college to become elementary school teachers). In addition to the credit points earned during the course of studies, two to six weeks of internships are necessary to get a teacher license. Considering the short time of practical experience, the Japanese model of teacher education tends to be characterised by a lack of professionalism. There is then a possibility of great tension when it comes to internships or the start of the demanding career of young professionals (Shimahara, 2001, p. 96).

4. Discussion of possible Solutions to the mentioned Problems

The Japanese school system is facing a number of challenges that affect students, teachers and society as a whole. To successfully address these challenges, far-reaching reforms and a comprehensive review of the education system are needed. Promoting critical thinking, supporting students' and teachers' mental health and creating a more inclusive and flexible curriculum are crucial steps in this direction (Drinck, 2017, p. 92).

An approach to reducing working hours for teachers could be opening up to more labour migration and thus also counteracting demographic change (Feifel, 2015, p. 42). Through labour migration, the education system could also open up in terms of an international update and address the

challenges of globalisation, as there is an increasing demand to deal with these (Drinck, 2017, p. 91). However, Feifel (2015, p. 38) points out that immigration can only alleviate the problem, but not solve it entirely, as it would be difficult to generate enough migration to Japan to keep the population at a constant level. In addition, the idea of large-scale migration to Japan is met with scepticism in Japanese society, as this could affect social peace (Feifel, 2015, p.42). A further measure to counteract demographic change could be more incentives for teachers to work in rural areas (Asgari, 2016, p. 69).

An increase in teacher salaries could also be an aspect to be considered to be implemented by the Japanese state in order to counter the shortage of teachers. In addition to working hours and salary increases, continuous training and support should be provided for teachers to improve their teaching and keep up with the latest educational developments (Asgari, 2016, p. 69).

The introduction of a more flexible curriculum could provide a space for critical thinking and creative learning and not only encourage student interest but have the positive effect of minimising teacher stress. Following on from this, the curriculum could be updated to meet the demands of the 21st century.

Implementing these solutions requires the co-operation of educational institutions, government, teachers, parents and society as a whole. Continuous monitoring and evaluation of progress is also crucial to ensure that the Japanese school system provides the best educational opportunities for its students in the long term and successfully overcomes the challenges.

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