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Education and Its Impact on Students' Careers

Fellow students, have you already decided on your careers? Adults, are you satisfied with your current careers? These are some questions I would like to ask before you read this paper, for Japanese students' lack of a solid career plan compared with American students has bothered me for some time. Through the Stanford e-Japan Program, I have formulated a theory on the connection between the education system and students' perspectives on their careers. I compared the education systems and students' attitudes in Japan and the U.S. to verify it.

To begin with, I compared how classes are conducted in the two countries. In Japan, the classes are mostly lecture-based ones where teachers teach their students following the contents of textbooks and students simply memorize what their teachers taught them. According to a survey conducted by *National Institutions for Youth Education*, more than 90 percent of Japanese students answered "yes" or "pretty much yes" to a question like the following: Are your classes based on the textbook memorization? In contrast, in the U.S. the classes are most likely to be discussion-based ones. Plus, American students answered with a high ratio that their classes are based on presentations in the same survey ("Kōkōsei no benkyō to").

The difference is prominent in history classes. In Japan, teachers teach history based on textbooks and they only teach the facts and when each event happened. In the U.S., many of the

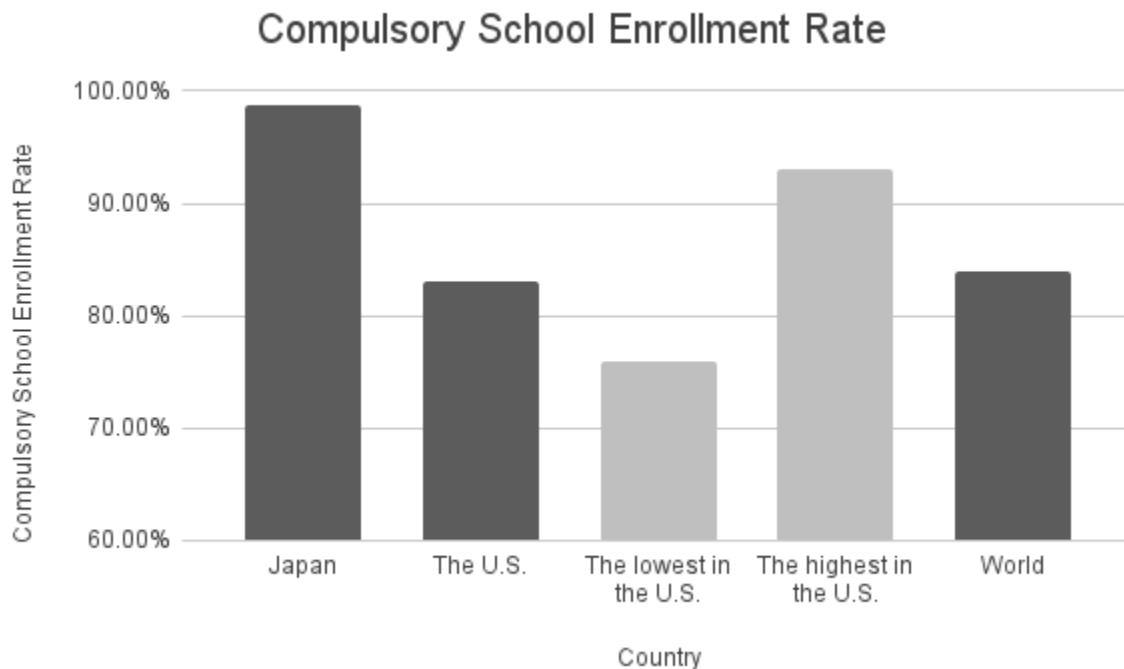
classes are discussion-based and students share each other's opinions about each event ("Gakunenbetu ni kaisetu...").

When describing the differences in the history classes between the two countries, the system also seemed to influence homework. In Japan, teachers assign students fill-in-the-blank exercise sheets that are mostly answer-to-question problems. Whereas in the U.S., students' homework often requires more self-expression; students submit a report on what they discussed in the class, or they receive assignments to research on given or chosen topics and make a presentation using digital devices. One of the reasons for these differences may be the class size or the number of students per teacher. In a meeting with the Reischauer Scholars Program students, one of the students indicated that she had a maximum of 15 students in her class and that there were classes with even smaller numbers of students. This fact is very surprising since, in contrast, Japanese schools have an average of more than 30 pupils in a class (Hino). The smaller number of students per teacher allows teachers to focus on individual students, thus making it possible for them to look through the assignments more carefully.

The second comparison will be regarding how Japanese and U.S. universities are evaluated. In Japan, there is a measurement to rank universities in the country as well as the students trying to apply to those schools. This is called *hensachi*, namely "deviation score." This value tells us how different a typical student's score, who applied to a university is from the statistical mean. Generally, a score of 50 is average, and it is likely to be believed that the best universities have the highest "*hensachi*" scores. Apparently, the U.S. had no concept like *hensachi* to determine a university's relative ranking in the country. However, there was an interesting analysis by Jonathan Wai, an assistant professor at the University of Arkansas, and

his colleagues. They evaluated universities according to SAT scores of the students they admitted. In addition, they assessed the correlation between their test-score-based rankings and other rankings published by magazines and newspapers. What they discovered was, “The schools that end up at the top of the test score rankings also will end up at the top of these other rankings” (Wai). Provided that, the problem may not be the evaluation system itself, but the influences it has on students. As *hensachi* is just an indicator to measure academic scores, it makes Japanese students obsessed with their scores, which sometimes limits their opportunities when choosing which university to go to, for they may only consider the universities with high *hensachi* scores instead of the ones that are best suited to help them reach their dreams. So, the way American universities are evaluated may be better as they consider various factors apart from the academic scores, leading students to further look at those other factors.

Lastly, educational equality in the two countries must be compared. In Japan, the compulsory school enrollment rate is 98.8 percent. This percentage is relatively high from the standard of other advanced countries (“Kōtōgakkōkyōiku...”). The U.S. also has a high mandatory school enrollment rate of 83 percent, but it is slightly lower than the world average of 84 percent. However, this rate varies from one state to another: 76 percent at the lowest, and 93 percent at the highest (“United States | Education ...”).

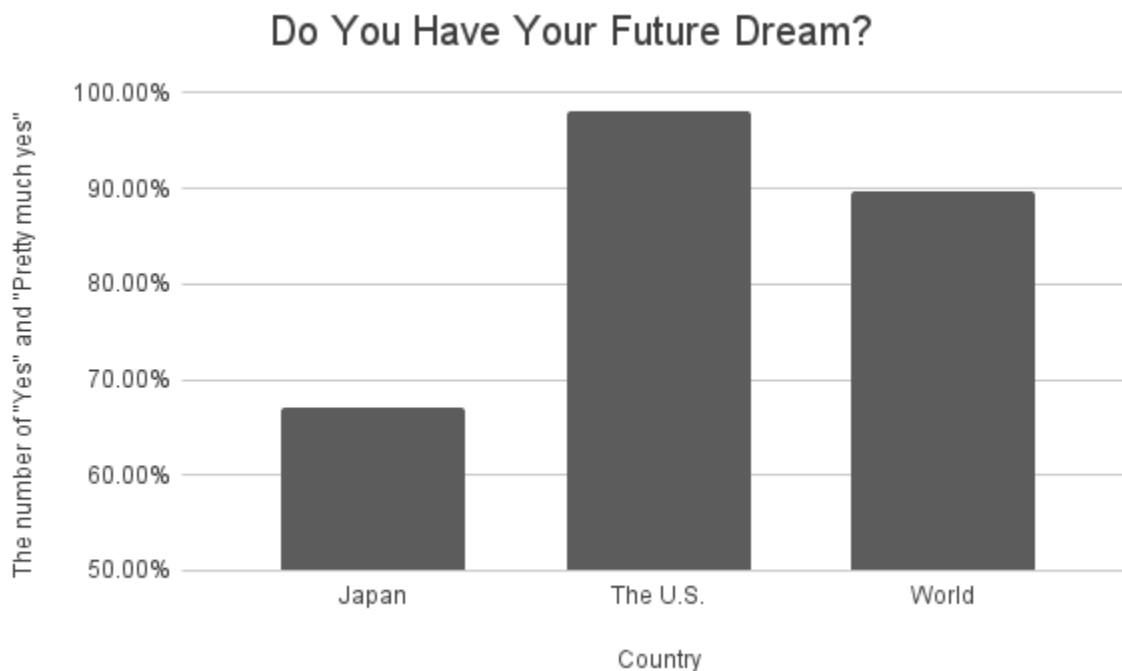


One reason for this cross-regional disparity may be whether the country operates a federal system or not. In Japan, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology issues a national curriculum guideline for every school in the country to follow. This guideline makes Japanese education more equal throughout Japan as it makes teaching processes easier for teachers to unify. Also, its funds are distributed from both the national government and the prefectural government, thus leading to almost no difference based on a district's median property value. The U.S. government published the "Common Core State Standards (CCSS)" guidelines about ten years ago, but until then the country did not have a common standard. Even now some states do not apply the CCSS to their education (Strauss). Moreover, students' socioeconomic backgrounds often determine the quality of their education; states with richer citizens tend to go to schools funded by high property taxes, with better services, while other

districts with poorer students are apt to get inferior facilities (Semuels). In sum, Japanese education excels American education in providing educational opportunities.

Above, the two countries' educations in terms of the three factors have been compared: the style of classes, *hensachi*, and the school enrollment rate. The differences in these three factors have relevance to students' career perspectives.

For a start, much fewer Japanese students tend to have visions for their careers than American students. Sixty-seven percent of the Japanese students do not have clear dreams for their future, while 98 percent of the American students do (“【Vol.128】Future Dream...”).



This lack of clarity for Japanese students may be because they do not have many opportunities to discuss with other students and broaden their horizons. Also, national curriculum standards might limit the teachers from providing their students with more unique experiences.

Comparatively, the American education system allows students to learn further about what each student is outstanding in.

Secondly, many students in Japan prioritize job security and stability when choosing a job and a large proportion of them engage in jobs that are part of larger organizations, like civil servants and teachers. In contrast, many American students aim to become doctors, architects, sports players, and entrepreneurs, jobs that do not necessarily belong to a larger organization. (“Kōkōsei no sinro...”). One reason is mostly the same as the reason for the first difference mentioned earlier: Whether students have dreams or not influences what they value when deciding their future careers.

Finally, Japanese students think that stability, high salary, and responsible position are what matter to them when choosing their future jobs. On the other hand, the U.S. students put weight on the sense of accomplishment and significance of the job. This difference has to do with the way students are evaluated for the university entrance examination. Japanese students are always compared with other students by *hensachi* and sometimes they are not allowed to apply to a university because their *hensachi* scores are short of the university's *hensachi* level. This system might also be reinforcing students' stability-focused way of thinking.

Another problem in Japanese education is students' lack of vitality for learning. As they are taught in lecture-based classes equally for better and worse, many of them are not very competitive compared to the U.S. students. It is difficult to change the current education style completely and immediately because, in some senses, the education system enables the Japanese society to have order. One possible solution would be to have schools introduce workshops where students can develop their interests by having new experiences. In these workshops,

students could have opportunities to discuss what they are interested in, and thereby broaden their perspectives on their careers.

One problem in American education is that it focuses too much on cultivating talented people or individual talents. In some senses, it is a good thing considering that the Japanese way of evaluating people by all their academic abilities can end up limiting someone's talent. However, it also means that the system may not be able to give chances to those who do not have outstanding talents, which leads to a larger education gap among the country's people. One solution would be to increase support for systems to support those who are not as advanced in their learning and need help catching up with the others.

We learned that Japanese education tends to develop students who fit the way of working in large organizations, while American education is comparatively more apt to develop students with the talent to become leaders. However, society does not consist of only leaders. Only when the leaders are followed by many followers will the society work well for everyone to live in. So, it is important to take advantage of both countries' education systems to develop each student's talent and ability more freely.

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