In The Context of Time: A Comparison of American and Japanese Senior High Schools

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I have been a senior high school teacher in both Japan and the United States for over nine years. For this reason many of my colleagues have urged me to write about my experiences and, in particular, to compare the secondary school systems in these two nations. The following essay is an attempt to begin this comparison.

I wish to start with something so essential that it defines the modern notion of formal education and sets it apart from the distant and not so distant past. This is the utilization of time: how learning and teaching adhere to the demands of the clock.

Those who question the fundamental importance of time in modern high school education need only ponder the very meaning of "high school" in the minds of most Americans. Originally, this term denoted a building or set of buildings as well as the place where such structures are located. Although it retains this meaning, it has been overtaken by a new definition, namely, the experience of high school and the time frame in which that experience takes place. For example, if an American is asked the question "how did you like high school?" the answer will certainly begin not with a discussion of a building or a plot of land, but rather with an opinion regarding his or her high school years or days and the experience that occurred during that period of time. Note that it is no longer necessary to use such qualifying words as years or days to express this meaning as it is now so commonplace it can be understood without them.

Even if the linguistic distinction between the timed experience of high school and the physical plant itself may be clearer in Japanese than in American English, the same preoccupation—one might say obsession—with time characterizes high school education in Japan as well as the United States. Years, months, weeks, days, even seconds are divided into units for educational purposes. In both countries teachers and students can be seen rushing about throughout the day urged on by bells and chimes in order to meet the demands of the clock. The clock determines when education must begin and when it shall end. Eating, talking, playing, relaxing, and even going to the lavatory are also decided by the demands of time. In short, time serves as the foundation for just about everything that takes place under the heading of high school education.

The essay that follows is therefore a comparison of how time is used in the secondary schools of the United States and Japan. It is divided into four sections. Part one is an introduction dealing with the history and purpose of senior high school education in both nations; the remaining sections describe how segments of time are used in these school systems: part two discusses the yearly school calendar, part three reviews the weekly and daily schedules from a student's perspective, while part four treats the same segments of time from a teacher's point of view.

Two prefatory notes are in order. The first concerns the format of this work. It is intended to be a descriptive and informative essay. I have tried to base most of what follows on my own experience as a student and educator and to avoid relying upon purely secondary source material. Of course, if a fact or idea is indeed drawn solely from an outside source it shall be duly noted and described in the Notes page at

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the end of this essay.
Secondly, please note that I shall use the terms high school and senior high school as synonyms, following the American usage which makes little or no distinction between them.

A Brief Journey through Time: Some Thoughts on the Background and Purpose of Senior High School Education

Public schools certainly existed in North America well before the nineteenth century. But it was in that century that the roots of the modern American public school system began to form. Schooling reflected the decidedly rural and agrarian society that was the United States. Well over half of all Americans worked and lived on farms until late in the 1800's.1) Moreover, many of the social institutions and norms of farming endured long after Americans began deserting agriculture for jobs in the manufacturing sector after the Civil War.

One-room schoolhouses that dotted the rural landscape typified American public education in the nineteenth century. The original purpose of these schools was to give farm boys and girls basic skills known as the three R's: reading, writing, and arithmetic. Many features of this school system were determined by the requirements of farming. For instance, attendance was hindered by the obligations of children to help their families with the many chores required on a busy farm, especially planting crops in the spring and harvesting them in summer or early autumn. Such planting and harvesting took priority over school attendance for most children. In general, schools needed to adapt to meet the seasonal requirements of their students.

The most important accommodation that schools made was to shape the academic school year around the seasonal cycles of farming. Thus a nine-month calendar with a threemonth summer recess lasting from June until early September was established. Despite the dramatic changes that have taken place both in American society and American public education since those days, this farmer-oriented calendar remains in effect to this day. (Although it is true that some American schools have experimented with “year-round” academic calendars, such schools are still in the distinct minority. Furthermore, even these schools need to keep their schedules attuned to the educational levels that precede and succeed them. For example, a high school with a twelve-month calendar must still graduate its students in June in order to prepare for college entrance in September.)

As so much of American education was centered on educating farm children in some basic skills, the purpose of high school was at first somewhat limited. Earning a high school degree in order to gain college entrance was the goal of but a privileged few. The role of high school was therefore more akin to a “finishing” school as it would prove to be the terminal degree for most Americans.

This perception of high school as the last stage of an average American’s formal education changed radically after the end of the Second World War. The impetus for this change was the enactment of what came to be known as the G. I. Bill. This Act of Congress enabled returning war veterans to receive full college tuition in return for their military service. High school education thus developed a dual role: to provide a solid preparation for college entrance and academic achievement for those who aimed at certain types of professional careers, while at the same time offering a good basic education as well as vocational training for those who intended to seek employment immediately after graduation.

In addition to these career-oriented goals, state departments of education also intended for high schools to mold young people into loyal citizens of a large, pluralistic democracy. Thus courses in United States history and Government became mandatory. Such patriotic gestures as reciting the Pledge of Allegiance became a compulsory morning activity for public school children. Yet along with such efforts to foster obedience and nationalistic pride came an effort to counter passive submission to authority in school children. The high
school curriculum also stressed the development of independent decision-making skills and the need to think critically. Therefore, a good high school teacher in the modern era is expected not only to teach subject matter but also to inspire students to think independently and to question traditional assumptions. For example, most teachers require students to raise their hands to either ask meaningful questions or to comment thoughtfully on certain topics during class discussion. Accordingly, passive behavior is actively discouraged.

Daily life in the late Edo era of Japan was in some respects similar to that of the United States. Both countries enjoyed a prolonged period of peace and stability. Both economies were based on agriculture as the primary means of subsistence. Also, no system of universal compulsory education was yet to be established during the Edo years. Despite the absence of such a system, the educator Thomas P. Rohlen has stated that as many as one quarter of the Japanese people during this period had achieved literacy, thus showing the relatively high educational attainment of at least a part of the population.  

A key difference between the nations was the relatively fluid nature of American society (though most African-Americans and women of all nationalities did not share in this mobility until much later) compared to the rigid class system that existed in Japan for much of the nineteenth century. Resting atop the class structure were the samurai, the warrior class of Japan. Not surprisingly, the main focus of formal education was the indoctrination and training of the sons of these warriors. Its purpose was certainly not to challenge but to preserve the feudal class structure of Japanese society.  

But the peace and order of the Edo era was shattered by the arrival of Commodore Perry's ships and the re-opening of Japan to foreign trade and outside influence. In the Meiji era, Nippon experienced one of the greatest economic and cultural transformations in world history. It embarked on a course to adopt Western methods and institutions at an extremely rapid pace. Formal education was no exception. High schools were created modeled upon those of Western nations, including the United States.  

Despite the adoption of the nomenclature and style of Western education, the Japanese school system still bore a uniquely Japanese imprint. It also began its rapid development at about the same time as its industrial development. Perhaps for this reason the annual school calendar does not seem to have been as wedded to the seasonal rhythms of farm life as it was in the United States.

But by far the clearest distinction between the two educational systems lies in educational philosophy. As mentioned above, American high schools stress independent thinking and behavior. Japanese schools, on the other hand, stress cooperation and working harmoniously in a group setting. Most first-hand accounts of Americans observing Japanese educational practices include a reference to the Japanese motto that best summarizes this philosophy: "the loose nail shall be hammered down". Signs of acting or thinking too independently are actively discouraged. Forces such as peer pressure, teacher reinforcement, and student self-discipline combine to eliminate most of the independent behavior patterns that are taken for granted in the United States. For example, raising hands in the classroom to ask meaningful questions or offer comments and opinions on subject matter is extremely rare, especially at the senior high school level.

I have already discussed the changing role of high school education in the United States. At first regarded simply as a terminal stage of formal education, it was transformed into an institution with a dual purpose: to prepare some students for entry into the work force while training others to gain admission to a two or four-year college. In Japan a similar transformation occurred although it happened about twenty years or so after the one in the United States. While American young people enjoyed the fruits of the economic boom of the 1940s and 50s, Japan
was still recovering from the devastation of war. In such a dire milieu, focusing on college entrance must have seemed impractical for all but a few fortunate young people. But when Japan finally emerged from this depressed period to enjoy unprecedented prosperity in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, most young people now view college entrance as a ticket to a well-paid professional career, just as Americans had begun doing a couple of decades earlier.

However, key differences remained between the two systems. Although new colleges were constructed in the boom years in Japan, the total number built was miniscule compared to the thousands of four-year institutions that went up in the United States. For this and other reasons gaining admission to any four-year college has become far easier for Americans than for the Japanese. Well over half of American students succeed in entering colleges and universities whereas less than half of their Japanese counterparts enjoy the same privilege.6

An American student with only fair grades and admission test scores has a chance to gain admission to a good or even very good university if he or she has the financial resources to pay for the tuition and living expenses. But in Japan the situation is reversed: competition to enter even a mediocre four-year college is extremely keen; financial hardship is of secondary importance. Therefore, the main purpose of Japanese high schools is to prepare students for a series of college entrance examinations given in the third and final year of study. Such exams determine not only college admission but also the entire course of a young person’s life. Many of the thousands who fail these exams spend at least one additional year after leaving high school in order to study full-time for these tests, usually attending one of the “cram schools” designed for this purpose.

For the fortunate few that gain admission to a prestigious university, the period of intensive study comes to an end. College itself is viewed as a place to relax, meet new friends, and enjoy life for four years before preparing for the brutally serious world of Japanese corporate life.

High School Education and the Compartmentalization of Time: Comparing the Annual School Calendar

High school education in the United States is a four-year program for young people who normally enter their first year at about age fourteen and graduate at age eighteen. Each school year begins in early September just after the end of the American holiday known as Labor Day. The year ends about mid-June on one of the very last days of spring. The end of the year brings a long summer recess lasting about seventy or more days before the next year begins again in September. The school year itself is divided into two halves called semesters: the first ends in late December right before the Christmas holidays, and the second begins the first weekday after January 1st and continues until June.

This yearly calendar is essentially the same for all grades in American primary and secondary schools. The one major exception to this yearly calendar applies to fourth year students, known as seniors, who generally finish regular instruction a few weeks earlier than underclassmen. The commencement ceremony for graduation is usually held in the latter part of May. This early departure is intended to give students enough time to prepare for visits to prospective colleges or to look for part-time or full-time employment.

The high school calendar in Japan has several key differences. The duration of high school is only three years as compared to four in the U.S. But these years are far more concentrated and intensive. A typical year begins in early April and ends about mid-March. Education is on a year-round system that is divided into trimesters. The first runs from early April until about July 20th, the second commences in early September and ends in late December, and the third starts in early January and ends in March. There is a summer break that lasts for about forty days or so, significantly less than the over two months enjoyed by American
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students.

In practice, however, relatively few students or teachers actually take an uninterrupted vacation from their duties. Most students are busy taking courses in "cram schools" or attending "study camps"—the high schools offer the latter themselves—in order to improve their chances of passing the college entrance examinations. Teachers are kept busy by teaching in the study camps or in the cram schools. They must also do endless paperwork in the large faculty room where most teachers have desks covered with huge piles of books and papers. Those who are homeroom teachers may also meet with troubled students, sometimes on a daily basis, thus rendering any long-term vacation highly unlikely.

Like their American counterparts, Japanese third-year students are permitted to end classes early, with the last regular classes on about January 25th. The formal graduation ceremony takes place on March 1st. This means that graduating students have over five weeks with no regular classes (although a homeroom meeting and a few other special classes are sometimes scheduled in this interim). Students thus have a good deal of "free time", a rare commodity in Japanese life. They are supposed to spend this interval by preparing any final materials for college entrance, or looking for full-time employment, or talking with their homeroom teachers about their future plans. In reality, however, most students spend this time in non-academic, pleasurable activities. In a high school where I taught in Nagasaki prefecture, homeroom teachers were required to walk through the streets of the surrounding community, searching for mischievous students in pachinko parlors, smoking areas and video game centers. In the Kanto metropolitan area school policy seems far more lax. Many students can be seen openly violating school rules regarding smoking or exotic dress. Nevertheless, they are still considered high school students until the March 1st graduation ceremony.

Weekly and Daily Schedules for Students

American students attend high school from Monday through Friday; there is usually no regular Saturday class schedule. The typical school day varies a bit from school to school, but it generally begins at 8:00 A.M. Some schools begin with a short homeroom period lasting about ten or fifteen minutes. This time is filled with taking attendance and listening to various announcements delivered over an intercom speaker. It is significant to note that teachers rarely have any formal meetings in the morning or, for that matter, at any other time of the day. Meetings are held perhaps once or twice a month and are generally held late in the day. In any case, American teachers meet far less than their counterparts in Japan.

Each class time is divided into fifty-minute sections called periods. There are about six periods in an average day, with a lunch break taken about 12:00 or 12:30 P.M. The day ends at about 2:50 or 3:00 P.M. On certain days of the week, especially on Friday, a school might shorten periods to forty-five or forty minutes, and the final bell might sound as early as 2:00 or 2:20 P.M.

Please note that although there may be six periods in a given day, it does not mean that all students have six actual classes, i.e., a time when teachers instruct in their subject fields. About two or three periods per week are reserved for study periods or what were formerly known as study halls. These periods are intended to give students a break from normal instruction in order to perform a variety of possible tasks. These include preparing for classes later in the same day, doing homework, visiting the school library to do some research for an assignment or term project, or meeting with a teacher in another room or building to ask questions or receive advice (such teachers would also have study periods at the same time; students would not be permitted to disturb a teacher who is instructing a class).

In American schools it is the students who travel from class to class, not the teachers. Pupils walk from room to room, storing books,
papers, and clothes in lockers that are located in school hallways. The homeroom teacher spends most of the day in his own homeroom waiting for students to arrive and begin classes. Pupils have about ten minutes between periods to walk to the next class.

In Japan, students usually attend school from Monday through Saturday (the Saturday schedule is a half-day of classes followed by club activities in the afternoon). The typical school day starts a bit later than in the U.S.: students arrive at their homerooms at about 8:20 A.M. for the early homeroom period. The first class of the day begins after this homeroom period. Japanese schools usually have a six-period day although some have experimented with an extra period to allow more instruction for the university entrance examinations.

It is the teacher, not the student that must travel from room to room. Japanese students consider their homerooms as their own private territory, quite unlike their American counterparts. Not only do they occupy these rooms for most of the day, they are also responsible for cleaning them as well. Cleaning time comes at the end of each day. Many older schools, especially in rural areas, have no janitorial staff. All of the cleaning in these schools is done by the students themselves. In more urban areas I have noticed the addition of some employees to clean parts of the building, but homeroom and classroom cleaning is still the students' responsibility.

Another interesting difference is the absence of study periods in Japanese high schools. There seems to be no concept of letting students alone to quietly study subjects of their own choosing even when teachers are present as supervisors. Whenever a teacher is present in a classroom, he must be instructing students in his specialty. But once the bell sounds to end a period of instruction, students are granted a surprising amount of freedom from authority. In the intervals between classes girls might be seen yelling or gossiping with their friends while boys might openly wrestle with each other in a rather reckless if jovial manner. Unfortunately, there is also a fair amount of bullying and fighting that also occurs in the homeroom or in other parts of the building. During intervals between classes teachers are usually situated far from their homerooms, perhaps enjoying a cigarette in the faculty room. They generally ignore bullying and other violent behavior on the part of their own students unless it is called to their attention and are forced to take some kind of disciplinary action.8)

**Weekly and Daily Schedules for Teachers**

American secondary school teachers must teach almost every period during an average school day. The only major exceptions are study periods or special occasions such as school assemblies. Thus the average teaching schedule is approximately twenty-two to twenty-five classes per week. When combined with study and homeroom periods, this number increases to a full thirty times each week.

On the other hand, the day may end rather abruptly: when the final bell rings signifying the end of homeroom, teachers may often leave the school grounds at the same time as their students. There are exceptions to this: sports coaches, club moderators, and those who must meet with an exceptionally troubled student would need to stay beyond the final bell. But for most teachers the long day of continuous instruction is so exhausting that any lesson planning, grading, or other important paper work is gathered up and finished at home. It is not unusual for most members of a high school faculty to have left the school grounds by 3:00 or 3:30 P.M.

Contrast this description with that for Japanese teachers. The average instructor teaches far fewer classes per week—perhaps only seventeen or eighteen classes. If Saturday is averaged in that comes to a daily average of three classes per week. Such a relatively light schedule would seem an elusive dream for most American teachers. But the "dream" stops there. As students begin returning home at 3:30 P.M. or so, the teacher must return to
the large faculty room where most of the teachers' desks are assembled. He or she is required to stay there, perhaps doing paperwork or talking with colleagues or students, until at least 4:00 or 4:30 P.M. But in reality the teacher will often stay much longer, perhaps to 6:00 or 7:00 P.M. Homeroom teachers of the third-year class have an additional burden: they must write recommendations for all the students of their homeroom classes, including those who have terrible grades and emotional problems.

But by far the most tedious demand on a Japanese teacher's time is the seemingly endless number of required faculty meetings. Each day begins with such a meeting, in which the school principal or vice-principal makes announcements for the day. These meetings are supposed to take only a few minutes because students are waiting for their homeroom teachers to come from the meeting and begin the short homeroom period. Unfortunately, these meetings often take significantly longer. Moreover, most of what is said in such meetings could instead be easily broadcast over the loudspeakers in each class. Truly confidential material not intended for the ears of students takes up a relatively short time at these meetings.

It is also true that some teachers stay quite late in the faculty room, not because they are required to do so, but rather to show their unswerving loyalty to their jobs and to their superiors. School administrators are often forced to take strong measures in such cases to force "workaholic" teachers to go home. For instance, faculty rooms are sometimes locked early and on weekends, not just to keep students out, but also to prevent work-addicted faculty from coming to school.

Notes
4) Rohlen, Japan's High Schools, pp. 53–55.
6) Meyer, p. 146.
7) Rohlen, pp. 150–151.

Bibliography