

## TEACHING HISTORY TO STUDENTS AGED 13 TO 14 IN JAPAN AND ENGLAND\*

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*The article reprinted here will be of interest to South African teachers. Note the difference in teaching styles and its significance for the process versus product debate. We will keep our readers informed about the development of this project. Of particular interest will be Professor Masayuki Sato and Mrs Kako Aoti's experience of the English schools and their response to Booth and Matthews' impressions.*

### **A comparative project**

Comparative studies of the attainment of European, American and Japanese students, particularly in the fields of science and mathematics, are legion and most seem to point to the superior achievement of the Japanese.

As far as we are aware, no such comparison has been made in the field of history; a research project set up by the University of Cambridge and the University of Yamanashi (Kofu) is attempting to remedy this deficiency. Funded jointly by the Great Britain Sasakawa and the Daiwa Anglo-Japanese Foundations, the project is undertaking a small scale survey of four classes of 13 to 14 year olds in four different schools - two in Japan and two in England. Using the same data collecting and interview protocols, attitude questionnaire and tests of non-verbal intelligence and administering tests to assess the pupils' understanding of

chronology, historical knowledge and concepts and skills of handling sources of historical evidence, we hope to build up a comparative picture of the strengths and weakness of the two systems which will throw each into clearer perspective.

The difficulties of such an undertaking are immense. First, there is the language barrier. Professor Masayuki Sato, our Japanese colleague at Yamanashi University, speaks good English but his colleague Mrs Kako Aoti knows only Japanese. We have no knowledge of the language and everything has to be translated both from English into Japanese and vice-versa, with all the dangers of distortion or misunderstanding that this can entail. Then there are cultural differences of, for example, attitudes to schooling or the role of the family.

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And finally there is the difficulty of defining what we mean by students' historical understanding. Most English history teachers, following the History National Curriculum, emphasise the processes of historical enquiry and that historical understanding is based on debatable evidence gleaned from a range of sources; Japanese history teachers are apparently more concerned with history as the story of a glorious national past from which lessons can be learned - a story which in the main is to be accepted and not questioned or analysed and based on acquiring factual knowledge.

### **Soham Village College and the Netherhall School, Cambridgeshire**

Fools rush in where angels fear to tread. In January 1993 we commenced our field work in the two East Anglican schools which had agreed to take part in the study. Soham Village College is in a small country town some twenty miles to the north east of Cambridge. It's a mixed comprehensive (all-ability) school of some 1 200 pupils aged from 11 to 16. Form 9H is an upper band class of 13 boys and 16 girls. The Netherhall School, by contrast, is situated in the city of Cambridge and is an all-through 11 to 18 comprehensive school of about 1 400 pupils. Again, we took an upper band of 17 boys and 14 girls. The Soham students have three one-hour lessons of history every two weeks - they work a ten-day timetable; the Netherhall students have seventy minutes every week. The emphasis in both schools is on student participation, discussion, group work and role play and on studying a wide range of source materials. Topic objectives are concerned with people and events in the past.

As yet, the new History National Curriculum is not directly affecting the history taught in year 9; it is only years 7 and 8 which are constrained by the statutory order, though next year this will apply to year 9 as well. So at the moment the history courses for the year 9 students at Soham and Netherhall are rather different. Soham students study a range of topics from 18th, 19th and 20th European and World history - for example, the French revolution and the wars which followed; the slave trade and its abolition; China and Japan in the 19th and 20th centuries; the American west in the 19th century. Netherhall also looks at key issues in 19th and 20th century European and World history but takes a more

thematic approach addressing concepts such as revolution, terrorism, nationalism, democracy, fascism.

Both classes are taught by experienced graduate history teachers, one with considerable service in the classroom, the other with six years service.

By the end of the Spring term (April 5 1993) we had administered the DH test of non-verbal intelligence to all the students, conducted in each class four observation schedules to quantify teacher intention, activity and tasks set and given a Likert type 'attitude to history' questionnaire; the students had completed an hour-long test which assessed their historical time-sense, knowledge and concepts and their skills in handling historical sources (the tests were similar in format but adapted to the syllabus the students had been following). We had filmed both classes in action and in both schools had extracted a group of three students to see how different their oral responses to the questions on the historical sources in the history test would be to their written responses. The group discussion was filmed. We also asked the teachers to keep a log of their lessons - their aims and objectives and their evaluation of each lesson - and we conducted a short interview with each.

### **Fuzoku and Isawa Junior High Schools, Yamanashi Prefecture**

This mass of data from the English Schools is still to be analysed; but shortly after its collection we had the opportunity to visit the two junior high schools in the prefecture of Yamanashi which are the Japanese counterparts of Soham Village College and the Netherhall School. The Japanese education system since 1945 has been closely modelled on the American. The elementary school covers the 6 to 12 age range in grade 1 to 6; the junior high school deals with ages 12 to 15 in grades 1 to 3; and the senior high covers the 16 to 19 age group in grades 1 to 3. Virtually all Japanese students stay on for senior high school though legally they could leave school after the junior high years. Senior high schools vary in status and emphasis. Some may have a more vocational emphasis - though it must be stressed that the broad general curriculum is maintained for up to the age of nineteen. The history curriculum

laid down by the national government follows a core of Japanese history from ancient times to the present (some 4 000 years) with comparisons made with other countries. History is part of a social studies programme which includes geography and civics. In the two schools in our project, geography is studied in grade 1 for four periods of 50 minutes each week, history in grade 2 and civics (where students study issues of citizenship, democracy and the state) in grade 3. In all there are six 50-minute periods each day with a ten minute gap between each period. The school day starts with the first period at 8:50 am.

It's hard to make direct comparisons between our two Cambridgeshire schools and Fuzoku Junior High School, Kofu, and Isawa Junior High School, in Isawa, though there are some superficial resemblances. Kofu is a university town about the same size as Cambridge and Isawa is a township about twenty miles away with a particular reputation for wine making. But the urban sprawl continues unabated from Kofu to Isawa and it is difficult to know where one township ends and another begins. And what a contrast too are the magnificent wooded mountains which surround the plain on which Kofu and Isawa are built with the somewhat drab flatness of the fenland landscape. Mysterious and beautiful, Mount Fuji lords it over them all.

Fuzoku JHS is closely connected with Yamanashi University. There are 480 students on role and a full-time teaching staff of 20. The Principal is appointed by the University (as is the Principal of Fuzoku elementary school which is on the same campus); and students from the university in initial teacher training will undertake their school experience in these two schools. The JHS is a clean, functional three-storey building. All students are responsible once a day for cleaning the school; and students and visitors alike take off outdoor shoes when entering the building. But to Western eyes, what immediately impresses are the students. They are immaculately dressed, the girls in naval type tops and dark blue pleated skirts, the boys in dark blue, cadet style jackets and trousers with a peaked cap for outdoor wear. *In high summer, of course, open necked shirts and no jacket are permitted.* But they are also extraordinarily self disciplined, even when supervised. *Even the youngest make there way to school - we saw little elementary school tots in Tokyo negotiating the*

horrendous traffic and metro system entirely alone; and we observed virtually no examples of discipline being exerted by the teachers or indeed of any teacher even raising his or her voice.

### Lessons observed at Fuzoku Junior High School

We were privileged to watch two lessons at Fuzoku JHS taken by a young and energetic social studies teacher of some experience. We would emphasise a number of points which struck us. Students generally do not move classrooms as they do in England; for most of the day they stay in their own bases. There are of course some specialist rooms such as science laboratories or music rooms; but a social studies teacher will move from room to room and this inevitably makes it difficult to bring in a variety of teaching materials. Secondly, the teacher (certainly at Fuzoku and Isawa) teaches one grade only throughout the school year (April to March) and then moves up with his class at the beginning of the new school year. This must make it easier for a teacher to get command of the material to be taught. An English teacher by contrast may be taking classes in every year of an 11 to 18 age range school. Thirdly, classes are bigger in size. Each of the classes in our research project has forty pupils, in theory equally balanced between the sexes. The classrooms too are more formal in their layout. Each has single desks arranged in four rows of ten, each row for a single sex. We also noted that no student work was displayed in the classroom, possibly as a consequence of no one teacher having the room as a subject base, as is common practice in England. Finally we were struck by the fact that all history teaching at Fuzoku Junior High School is concentrated in one year (grade two), as it is in Isawa. The Japanese history students therefore will have received about 100 hours of history this year as against about 100 hours in Netherhall and a 155 hours in Soham spread over three years.

The first lesson that we saw was a survey of the English political system from 1603 to 1688, part of a unit of work on European absolutism which was being contrasted with the Japanese political system of the time. Students have a standard textbook issued by the national government and a colourful illustrated resource book chosen by the Yamanashi social studies teachers from a list

prescribed by the national government and bought by students for 100 Yen (approximately 70 pence sterling). In England, by contrast, teachers are free to choose whatever text they like and students do not purchase them - the books are bought by the school. The teaching style was didactic with the teacher making notes on the chalkboard which the students had to copy. There was little interaction with the students though there were occasional questions - for example, "Do you understand what I have said?" The students reacted impassively; we observed two students who appeared to be doing no work. The teacher ignored them, believing (as he told us later) that they would complete the work in their own time. The lesson ended with an assignment: "Describe the process and effects of the English revolutions". This was started in class with teacher offering individual assistance and was to be completed for homework. Students were expected to respond to the task in any way they thought appropriate - chart, table, essay etc - but this was not made explicit. The teacher was expecting between half and one page of work - again, a matter that was not explained. We were advised that the teaching style of this lesson was conditioned by the government recommendation that about one hour be spent on the topic.

The second lesson, four days later, with the same class, was on a Japanese cultural topic, the Edo period from the 17th to the 19th centuries up to the Meiji restoration. The class had been moved to the library (a quite well resourced room with eleven large tables, each capable of seating six students). The work consisted of a single sided worksheet in two sections. In the first section, the students used their text and resource books to fill in some blank spaces comparing the Genloku and Kase cultures of the period - for example, "What are the dates of the Genloku culture?" "Who were the dominant figures of the culture?" In the second section, the students were directed to complete an assignment: "Choose a cultural topic you are interested in and consult books and materials in the library and at home. Research the topic and add your own impressions."

For most of the lesson, therefore, the teacher was in a supervisory role, helping students find appropriate books and explaining texts. What struck us was the way in which the very open-ended task was tackled by the students without any apparent difficulty - though some

certainly took longer to complete the relatively easy first section of the worksheet. However, all students remained on task for the whole lesson. It must be borne in mind however that though nominally an all-ability class, the popularity and special nature of the Fuzoku JHS means that the principal can exercise some selection. It is difficult for us to say at this stage how typical this is of other junior high schools.

One student chose to focus on a comparison between the Ukiyoe style of painting in the Genloku and Kase cultures. Unprompted, he decided to make a comparative chart of three columns which included the names of the artists, the artistic works and his personal impressions. For example, he listed "Hishakawa" in column one (an artist of the Genloku culture) and "Women's portraits" in column two. His impression was that "compared with the Kase culture, the women's portraits show the Genloku culture's wonderful human-ness [does he mean "life-like quality"? This is where translation is so difficult.] Ideas of thinking were free because Japan had closed its country and stopped influences from foreign countries. Japan developed its own culture".

We asked the teacher the criteria for the assessment of the completed assignments. By English standard they appeared general and subjective. A good grade ("A") would reflect work which was focused on the chosen topic, was clearly explained and well-expressed. The lowest grade would be a "C", reflecting poor work.

### **Lessons observed at Isawa Junior High School**

A day spent at Isawa Junior High School was also a rewarding experience. In many ways, the set-up, students and buildings seemed very similar to that of Fuzoku JHS - the same emphasis on student responsibility for cleaning the building and similar classroom layout and organization. But unlike Fuzoku, Isawa is developing into an experimental community college with impressive modern sports facilities and a community centre incorporating library, craft centre and auditorium. There are 800 students on roll with 39 full-time teachers and one part-time. Curriculum organisation and time allocation are the same as at Fuzoku.

The history teacher whose lessons we observed was also young and experienced. We saw him give two lessons to two different grade two classes on the same topic: the political influence of 7th century China and Korea on 8th century Japan.

As at Fuzoku, the teacher had no base and visited the students in their classroom. In addition to the books the Fuzoku students possessed, the Isawa students also had a history dictionary which they had purchased.

As in the first lesson at Fuzoku, the teacher dominated the class, though interaction and humour were more in evidence. He also used visual aids, which consisted of two large coloured drawings which he held up. One, for example, showed peasants working hard in the fields at the command of the Chinese emperor. "How would you feel to be working like that?" he asked. Students responded briefly, as at Fuzoku standing to give their answers. Immaculate board notes accompanied the teacher's explanations which the students copied down. One student was praised by the teacher for adding further notes taken from the textbook. This lesson was to be continued at a later stage; no homework was set. Indeed, the teacher told us that he had set no homework that term. (Virtually all English schools will have a policy of homework being set regularly).

After the lesson we asked a group of students through our charming interpreter, Miss Michyo Takano, about their attitude to the school curriculum. Their best subject was Physical Education, their worst English. "History", they said, "Is interesting, it's simple. It's nice to know the facts. It's not hard, like mathematics" (revealing comments, we thought, given the attitude of English students following the pupil-centered, historical sources based history curriculum, the Schools History Project, who felt that the history they were learning was more difficult than maths.)

### Issues

To understand the Japanese people and their culture takes a lifetime, they say; and we would certainly be very ill-advised to come to any conclusions about Japanese history teaching on the basis of such a short visit. Besides, Professor Masayuki Sato and Mrs Kako Aoti, our Japanese collaborators, have

only just commenced their field work using the same research measures that we have used in England. But there are a number of issues which have arisen.

First, both English history teachers in our research are more concerned with creating lively, pupil-centred learning based on a wide range of historical sources than with explicit emphasis on content, chronology and coverage. By contrast, we have developed the impression that the two Japanese teachers we observed, though as concerned as the English teachers with the development and progress of their students, primarily see history as a body of knowledge to be learned. This may well be a factor in promoting a predominantly didactic teaching style. The position is further reinforced by Japanese assessment methods which emphasise the recall of factual information. The students are tested seven times a year and the results of these examinations are of great importance for gaining access to a senior high school of good reputation.

It may be however that such teaching methods and emphases give the Japanese students a sound historical framework; as yet we have no evidence to support or refute this hypothesis. Nor have we any evidence of the level of understanding of the information they have memorised. Could it be though that the English teachers in our research have sacrificed the notion of an historical narrative framework where chronology, events and people are firmly in context, for a style of teaching which emphasises conceptual understanding and the use of historical sources but which may leave the student without a clear overall picture? Our very early and provisional analysis of the English data suggests that the students do lack such a map of the past but that their conceptual understanding of history is sound.

Secondly, in all four history lessons in Japan that we observed, we saw teaching strategies that would have been less successful had they been used in our two English schools. Intelligent and motivated though the Soham and Netherhall students are, we think it unlikely that they would sit so passively, particularly when nearly every fifty-minute lesson in a six-period day may well have the same didactic teaching style. Our Japanese colleagues have yet to administer the DH non-verbal tests to the Fuzoku and Isawa students but we believe that we have observed students

in both countries of comparable intellectual ability. The difference in behaviour, therefore, may well be cultural as evidenced by the homogeneity of society, the respect students have for their teachers, the way they care for their schools and the competitiveness of society (particularly peer group pressure) with its emphasis on examination success. All this leads to close links between home and school; class teachers visit the home at least once a year and there are open days when parents (and others) can visit the school not merely to see the buildings and displays of work but to observe (and later criticise at an open forum) teachers at work in the classrooms with their students. Education in Japan seems a much more open and public affair.

Our final point is a general one. It concerns the effectiveness of Japanese education. About eighty per cent of Japanese school students attend evening cramming schools - Juku - which are run by private educational companies independent of the school system. Some students may attend every night of the

week for two or three hours. When we asked our Fuzoku students how many attend Juku, every student in the class raised his or her hand (we did not discover how frequently they attended). Attendance at Juku is almost a way of life for Japanese students - "Students go to school to make friends, to Juku to study". we were told. Does this indicate a weakness in the Japanese educational system and an excessive concern with the memorisation of facts? Perhaps and emphasis on a wider range of skills and concepts delivered through more flexible teaching might enable Japanese students to achieve greater depth of understanding and thus make the Juku system superfluous.

Our visit to Japan was memorable. We certainly encountered great hospitality and saw wonderful and beautiful sights. We are fascinated by the schools with which we are working and look forward eagerly to seeing the data which our Japanese colleagues are collecting. Perhaps then we may be in a position to deal more fully with the issues our visit to Japan has raised.