

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM OTHERS?

by Val D. Rust

America is not the only country where teaching is not what it used to be.

In the once-homogeneous West German cities of Plettenberg and Altona, teachers must overcome barriers of language and culture much like those that complicate teaching in Florida, New York, and Texas. One of every three students in these two cities, and one out of five in Hamburg, are children of blue-collar "guestworkers"—from Turkey, Yugoslavia, Italy, and Spain. Most speak little German, and their parents resist full assimilation into German culture.

American schools have no monopoly on violence or delinquency, either. The term "blackboard jungle" is used frequently by Japanese newspapers. In a nation preoccupied with scholastic achievement (see box, pp. 84–85), the pressure on teachers and pupils alike can be intense. Last year, a handicapped Japanese teacher, harassed by students, stabbed one of them with a fruit knife. In Kisarazu, near Tokyo, a 14-year-old girl was beaten with a bamboo sword for hours by a dozen classmates. Halfway around the world, West German teenagers in black leather jackets, Maltese crosses sewn on their sleeves, bully teachers and steal from classmates. A story about these *Halbstarken* ("half-crazies") appeared last year in the news weekly *Die Zeit* under the headline "Kids are Killing the Life of Teachers."

"Teacher burnout," too, appears to cross national boundaries. In France, the problem became so serious that in 1972, the government established a "National Re-Adaptation Center" where beleaguered teachers can receive free hospital care and psychotherapy. Hundreds have sought treatment. Concern for teachers' well-being has not, however, stifled criticism of their performance. Only last year, French President François Mitterrand, addressing his Council of Ministers, blamed shoddy teaching for the younger generation's "loss of a collective memory."

In England as well, public officials are demanding that teachers improve their work. Her Majesty's inspectors reported in 1982 that too many teachers "revealed insecurity in the subject they were teaching." Rather than engage their students in

thoughtful discussion, they relied on “narrow questions often requiring monosyllabic answers.” The Secretary of State for Education and Science confirmed the diagnosis in a 1983 White Paper—but recommended against expensive remedies. Teachers must simply work harder, the report concluded, and their training should be tougher.

As teachers come under fire, their social status and their self-esteem inevitably suffer. A 1981 International Labor Organization study found that politicians and parents alike are losing confidence in the schools and those who staff them. The result in many countries has been a “lowering of morale and decreasing interest in teaching as a profession.”

Declines in the psychic rewards of teaching help to explain the proliferation of teachers’ strikes and work slowdowns. In 1979, West Germany’s *Gewerkschaft Erziehung und Wissenschaft* (Union of Education and Science) used both tactics in a struggle to hold the teacher’s classroom time down to 25 hours per week. In Japan, teaching has long been considered a “saint’s job,” but teachers are seeking more than spiritual compensation. The radical Japanese Teachers’ Union now takes the position that teachers are “laborers” and must resist exploitation.

240 Schooldays

If it is more difficult to be a teacher these days, it is also more difficult to become one. Thanks to declining birthrates, the supply of instructors continues to exceed the demand. In most Western European countries, an aspiring teacher has only a one-in-three chance of landing a job immediately after finishing college. Some 40,000 of West Germany’s unemployed adults are trained teachers.

Turmoil within the classroom, criticism from without, rising militancy, and a shortage of jobs—this is the teaching environment in much of the world. And when we look beyond the headlines, at the less-publicized conditions of teaching, we find further parallels among nations. The length of the school year, for example, varies little. The average American teacher is due in class between 178 and 185 days per year. In England and Norway, 190 days per year is typical, and in other European countries, the average falls between 180 and 200. (Japan and West Germany, where teachers work as many as 240 days per year, do not fit into this pattern, but West Germany will before long. It is moving from a six-day school week to a five-day week.) And, whereas America and England were once unusual in their reliance on women for teaching, females are now well represented

in schools throughout Europe.*

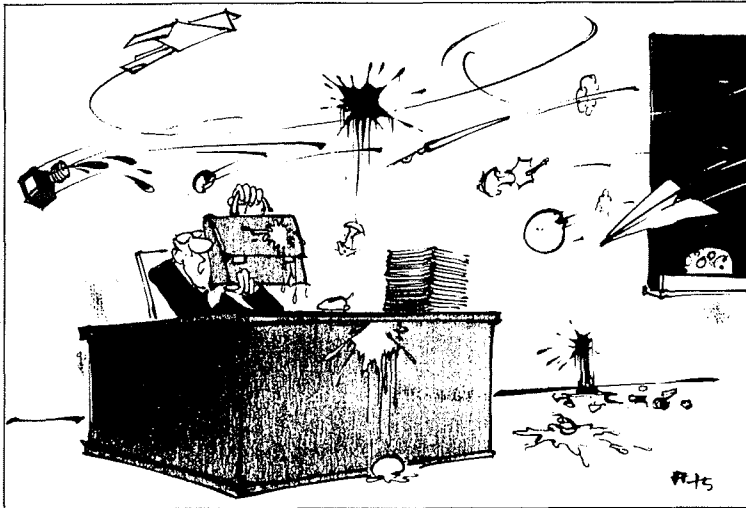
But are the *similarities* among classrooms in the West most illuminating to Americans? Not really. William Taylor, principal of London University, recently commented, "Educational conditions in different countries are about 95 percent the same . . . but the differences are the crucial ones." Indeed, we might learn something from such contrasts. By some major measures, school systems in the United States are inferior to those in Europe and Japan. It would be useful to know why.

Losing Ground

Arrayed against their peers abroad, American students have fared poorly in standard tests. During the 1960s and early 1970s, the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement administered exams to elementary and secondary school students in 17 developed countries, including Japan, West Germany, and Italy. Some 30,000 American pupils, ages 10 to 19, took a total of 19 exams in subjects ranging from mathematics to literature. As a group, they finished last in seven categories. On *no* test did they rank first or second. (Perhaps the most impressive performance was turned in by the Japanese, who participated in only six tests and finished first in three.) Some American scholars question the significance of these results. They note that the United States is more successful than most developed countries in keeping children on the school rolls; so perhaps the "average" American student found himself pitted against above-average students abroad. In 1980, 93 percent of American students between the ages of 14 and 17 were enrolled in school. In 1983, the estimated proportion of 14-17-year-old children enrolled in school was 95 percent in Japan, 85 percent in France and Britain, 79 percent in Australia, and 55 percent in Italy. But differences in teacher training and

*Japan and West Germany long excluded women from the classroom, but the two world wars ended this custom. Last year, 51 percent of the teachers in West Germany were women, compared with 40 percent in Japan, 61 percent in France, and 60 percent in Britain. Today, the "feminization" of teaching at all levels of schooling worries educators in some European countries, largely because of a sad but true fact: As the proportion of women in a given profession exceeds some critical level, the profession's status declines.

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"Today we're discussing . . . splat . . . in social studies . . . pow . . . the topic . . ." was the caption of this cartoon, which appeared in the West German newsmagazine Der Spiegel in 1979.

ability may also account, at least in part, for the relatively poor showing of American youngsters.

In this regard, there is a key difference between the teaching professions in America and in Europe—what, in shorthand, we might call "dualism." The term refers to the separate and unequal treatment most European countries give primary school teachers, on the one hand, and secondary school teachers on the other. American teachers, grades one through 12, are remarkably similar in terms of education, pay, and ability. In Europe, grade school teachers are second-class citizens compared to their high school colleagues—who undergo far more rigorous training and reap the higher salaries and prestige awarded to respected academic professionals.

The roots of "dualism" go back 500 years—back to the separate historical meanings, in Europe, of terms that have become synonymous in America: grammar school and elementary school. "Grammar schools," the precursors of the modern European high schools, emerged during the Renaissance and played an important role in the popular revival of Greek and Roman learning. In the grammar schools, students as young as seven and as old as 20 acquired the linguistic and analytical skills needed to appreciate classical literature and philosophy. Upon

graduation, they typically pursued a university degree, which provided entry to the community of scholars and, hence, access to the fields of medicine, law, or teaching.

Grammar school teachers, like their students, were drawn primarily from the upper classes. They had attended elite schools themselves—the great “public” boarding schools in England, the *lycées* in France, and the *Gymnasien* in Germany. Like college professors, they belonged to academic societies, conducted arcane research, and read scholarly papers to assemblies of their peers. Philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, for example, wrote and published both volumes of his *Science of Logic* (1812 and 1816) during his eight-year tenure as headmaster of a Nuremberg grammar school.

Aping the Prussians

Elementary school students—and their teachers—were a different breed altogether. Lower schools did not appear in Europe on a large scale until the Protestant Reformation, as church-sponsored Bible-study classes. They eventually fell under control of local and then national governments, and their function changed accordingly. In a mercantile, hierarchical, religious society, they now imparted literacy, a common set of values, and devotion to God and country—in short, the ingredients of order in the emerging nation-state.

For such purposes, poor but literate laborers and housewives would do as teachers. Sometimes classes were held in church buildings, and gravediggers or sextons doubled as instructors. In 19th-century England, the task often fell to educated poor women—like Biddy in Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations* (1861), who keeps school for Mr. Wopsle’s great aunt in “a little general shop.”

Even during the mid-19th century, when primary school teachers in some countries were given education beyond elementary school, they did not partake of the rich diet given to the high school teacher; they attended not universities but special two-year teacher training academies, where subjects such as science, mathematics, and language took a back seat to religion, civics, and the rudiments of pedagogy.

In America, as the public schools developed, some educators set out to copy the Europeans. In 1836, Calvin E. Stowe, a classics scholar from Dartmouth and a proponent of universal education, declared the Prussian system of education “as nearly complete as human ingenuity and skill can make it,” and challenged Ohio legislators to copy it. To a certain extent, they did.

So did lawmakers in other states. The disciplined atmosphere of the late 19th-century American classroom, where silence was rarely broken except by teachers' instructions or mass recitation, was Prussian in inspiration.

Yet this was only one-half of the Prussian system—the bottom half, designed to turn the masses into reliable followers. The “grammar school,” where Europe’s leaders and professionals were trained, was not replicated, at least not on a large scale. To be sure, well-to-do New Englanders sent their sons to Protestant boarding schools—Exeter, Andover, Deerfield, and Choate. And some students took practical courses at other private “academies” en route to jobs as technicians or businessmen. (The first of these, the Academy of Philadelphia, was founded by Benjamin Franklin in 1751 and evolved into the University of Pennsylvania.) But such schools affected few Americans.

The American high school, which took form after the middle of the 19th century, had different roots. These schools grew incrementally, almost spontaneously, out of the grade school: “Advanced” courses, held for inquisitive teenagers, gradually gained the blessings of local school boards. During the last half of the century, state legislatures endorsed the idea of a separate school for “graduate” students. As the idea caught on, many educators, intent on building a system that would cut across class lines, shied away from the intensive academic focus found in Europe. In 1908, the National Education Association resolved that “the public high schools should not be chiefly [preparatory] schools for higher institutions, but should be adapted to the general needs, both intellectual and industrial, of their students and communities.”

Separate and Unequal

If high school is merely an extension of grade school, why should the training of high school teachers differ much from the training of grade school teachers? The answer seemed obvious during the mid-19th century, and to some—including, it seems, the people who educate our teachers—it still does. Many of today’s high school teachers, like elementary school teachers, qualified for their jobs by obtaining a bachelor’s degree in education. True, their studies may not have been confined to child psychology and curriculum planning; many satisfied degree requirements in the subjects they teach. But is that enough? These days, a handful of college-level courses in math hardly qualifies one to teach an advanced placement course in Calculus II.

In Europe, educators seem to recognize this. There, mass

JAPAN: THE EXTREME CASE

In many countries, teachers are confused about what the public really expects of them. Not so in Japan. There, the teacher's job is well defined: to prepare students for standardized tests.

Performance on exams largely determines what kind of high school (vocational or academic) a teenager will attend—and whether it will be a first-rate school. In the last year of high school, a second round of testing channels the highest achievers into prestigious universities. One's alma mater, in turn, helps to shape the rest of one's social and economic life.

For young Japanese (and their parents), the result is an obsession with learning: hard work, high pressure, strict discipline, and conformity. Students wear uniforms in class, rarely ask questions or express opinions, and heed the old Japanese proverb, "The nail that protrudes will be hammered down." Pupils typically spend four or more hours a night on homework, often in addition to private lessons at "cram schools." (These *jukus* and other preparatory services gross an estimated \$10 billion annually—one of every seven dollars spent on education.)

In class, teachers rattle off dates and names, facts and figures, uninterrupted; some prepare lectures by combing past university exams for questions often asked. "Information loading is the central



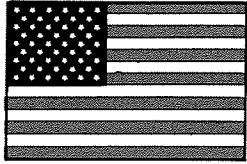
goal," observes Thomas P. Rohlen, in *Japan's High Schools* (1983).

Teachers (mostly men) enjoy high status and relatively high pay. They are addressed by the honorific title *sensei* ("the one who has gone before") and earn more than the average government worker.

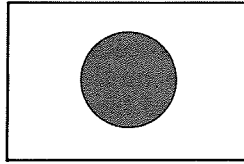
The price of status is hard work. School is in session Monday through Saturday, and teachers must report to work even during six of the 10 weeks of yearly vacation that students enjoy. In America, teachers send unruly charges to the principal's office; in Japan, they handle all discipline themselves.

The student-teacher ratio is higher in Japan than in any other major country. Yet instructors are expected to take a personal interest in each pupil's development. High school teachers sometimes make house calls to visit their *homurūmu* (homeroom) students.

Whatever its impact on creative thought, the school system in Japan succeeds in sharpening intellects. Over the last generation, the average Japanese IQ has risen seven points—and is now nine points higher than the average American IQ.



**TWO
HIGH SCHOOL
TEACHERS***



Stan Jackson	NAME	Suzuki Tatsuya
Garfield High	SCHOOL	Nishi High
Belmont, Iowa	DISTRICT	Shizuoka Prefecture (south of Tokyo)
37	AGE	35
male (like 51% of his colleagues)	SEX	male (like 85% of his colleagues)
B.A. in English	EDUCATION	B.A. in Japanese
\$19,712	SALARY	¥4,250,000 (\$17,000)
(2% of salary) x (number of years served).	RETIREMENT	100% of salary for 49.5 months; 70% thereafter.
\$1,200 for coaching drama club.	EXTRACURRICULAR	¥14,500 (\$60) per year for supervising archery club.
National Education Association. Dues: \$57/year.	AFFILIATION	Japanese Teachers Union. Dues: \$180/year.
7:45 A.M.	FIRST CLASS BEGINS	9:20 A.M.
2:15 P.M.	LAST CLASS ENDS	3:10 P.M.
50 min.	LENGTH OF CLASS	55 min.
22 min.	LUNCH TIME	60 min.
5 classes English	SUBJECTS TAUGHT	2 classes Modern Japanese; Japanese Classics I; Photography
25 classes in 5 days	CLASSES TAUGHT/WEEK	16 classes in 6 days
25-30	CLASS SIZE	40-45
First week in September—second week in June.	SCHOOL YEAR	First week in April—third week in March.
180	DAYS TEACHING	240
189	DAYS WORKING	268

*Information on this table represents a composite. Names are fictitious.

secondary education did not come until after World War II. In class-bound England, schools such as Eton, Harrow, and Winchester, hospitable to the sons of the powerful for centuries, became the models for schools that bright children from the middle and lower classes could attend for free. The teachers at these new high schools, like those at Eton, attended universities, not specialized training institutions. The same was true across Europe: High school teachers followed in the footsteps of grammar school teachers. The training of elementary school instructors remained separate.

Today, that division persists. European primary school teachers (like primary *and* secondary school teachers in America) spend a great deal of their time in college learning how, in theory, to teach. In England, for example, a first-year education degree candidate who hopes to teach third grade may take "Curriculum and Classroom Organization," "The Psychology of Play," and "Exceptional Children."

But European (and Japanese) secondary school teachers still learn *what* to teach. They immerse themselves in history, science, math, or language, just as an aspiring university historian, scientist, mathematician, or linguist would do. The European "bachelor's" degree is roughly equivalent to an American master's degree. In Norway or Germany, for example, university studies may last six years; often students have been concentrating on their specialty since the final years of secondary school. By the time European high school teachers enter the classroom, they are truly competent in their fields.

Weeding Out

"Methodology" is secondary. It is acquired on the job, as in West Germany, or in concentrated postgraduate courses, as in England and Norway.

Of course, one reason that a European teacher of science and math can—and must—acquire genuine competence in his subject is that the children he will be teaching are uncommonly bright and industrious. Most European countries have a system of student assignment, or "tracking," far more pervasive than that found in the United States. In some American high schools, children may still be put in either "accelerated" or "regular" biology courses, depending on their ability. In Europe and Japan, however, a child's ability may determine not only which biology class he takes, but whether he will even study biology. A student's entire course of study, not to mention which high school he attends—or whether he will attend high school at all, and

for how long—may hinge on his past grades, his performance on nationwide examinations, or some combination of these and other factors.

In West Germany, for example, children who seem bound for college are put into academic middle schools after fourth grade; those cut out to be engineers or mid-level managers are put on the “technical” school track; the “general” secondary school is populated mainly by those destined for blue-collar jobs. (In the end, only 21 percent of West Germany’s college-age population enrolls in a university.) Thus, chemistry teachers in Hamburg or Bonn do not need to know enough about developmental psychology to cope with a disruptive student who has no interest in chemistry and no aptitude for it. They do, however, need to know enough about chemistry to stir the curiosity of potential future chemists.

Victims and Beneficiaries

The number of “tracks” and the means of dividing students among them differ from country to country. In Britain during the 1960s, Harold Wilson’s Labor governments abandoned the two-track system of “academic” and “general” secondary schools in favor of the theoretically more egalitarian “comprehensive” secondary school. But Britain’s comprehensive schools may have as many as 16 discrete tracks, into which students are channeled on the basis of their academic records. In West Germany, parents’ preferences are weighed along with grades and test scores to decide what kind of secondary school a child attends. In Japan, students’ test scores and academic records determine their secondary school. In Norway, tracking is based mainly on past performance.

Although the sorting of pupils in Europe is still quite extensive by American standards, a number of European nations have joined Britain in moderating the tracking system in recent decades. That partly explains an important trend: The gap between secondary and primary school teachers is narrowing; as high school students become a less elite corps, teaching them becomes a less elite profession. Another reason is that the education of elementary school teachers has been enriched. These days, one must pass the stringent “secondary leaving exam” after high school to be eligible for admission to a teacher training institution, and hence for subsequent employment in primary school. (The leaving examination has long been required in Europe for university enrollment. A sorting-out device, it tests general knowledge—history, the sciences, and mathema-

tics—in West Germany and Norway, and more specialized knowledge in Britain. In 1970, only eight percent of West German, nine percent of English, and 22 percent of Norwegian “secondary school leavers” passed these exams.) So elementary school teachers are now better qualified.

In spite of these developments, the profession has not become homogenized. In Goettingen, West Germany, where the elementary school teachers’ training center is now part of Georg August University, the teachers’ campus remains an island unto itself, socially and academically. In Japan, aspiring primary school teachers now attend national universities, but they still take almost no classes in common with the student body at large.

The persistence of Europe’s dualism can also be seen in teachers’ salaries. In West Germany, starting secondary school teachers make 13 percent more than first-year primary school teachers; by retirement, the differential is 18 percent. In England, the gap is 34 percent at the beginning of the teacher’s career and 18 percent at the end. In the United States, by contrast,

At Eton, Britain’s elite 543-year-old boarding school, pin-striped trousers and cutaway jackets are mandatory.



the average secondary school instructor earns about \$950 more per year than the average elementary school teacher—a five percent difference.

European governments have acknowledged what most American school systems have not: Rare goods fetch high prices. Since fewer people can teach calculus than can teach long division, the former cost more.

The result of the special status bestowed upon secondary school instructors in Europe is excellence. Consistently, prospective high school teachers are among the universities' brightest students. By graduation, they clearly outshine their primary school colleagues and their American counterparts. The ultimate beneficiaries are the students. The West German high school student encounters teachers, teaching methods, and assignments comparable to those he will encounter in college; the American public high school student does not.

The Weakest Link

Clearly, American educators could learn much from high schools across the Atlantic. But for all the apparent advantages of the European approach to education, we should be careful about copying it.

Any extreme form of tracking, for example, runs up against the egalitarian premises that are deeply ingrained in America's character. West Germany's system—three kinds of high schools for three kinds of students—would not be warmly received in most U.S. communities. Still, it is true that a small fraction of U.S. high school students—perhaps 10 percent—get virtually nothing out of their academic courses and contribute even less, judging by most reputable studies. An entirely vocational curriculum for such teenagers might make life easier for them, their fellow students, and their teachers.*

In seeking to emulate European dualism, American school boards should not devalue their elementary school teachers. By some indices, these instructors do a better job than their colleagues in the high schools. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the reading and reasoning abilities of American nine-year-olds have risen since 1975.

But 17-year-olds have shown declines in those categories,

*America's closest approximations of the European academic high schools are found among its private schools. But, whereas the European academic high schools select students by ability, the five million students attending America's 21,000 private schools are selected mainly by family income; particularly in urban areas, those who can afford to send their children to private schools do so. Researchers have found private schools to be generally safer, more orderly, and more conducive to learning than the nation's 86,000 public schools.

further confirming the widespread suspicion that high school teaching is the weak link in U.S. public education and could be vastly improved. Here is where we could draw a very simple lesson from the European example: In recruiting and training high school teachers, keep in mind that one of their main functions is preparing young adults for a college education.

In other words, hire brighter people and make sure they know their subjects. These two goals mesh nicely. If preparing to teach high school meant studying one's chosen field of expertise deeply—rather than studying it superficially while expending precious hours on “how-to-teach” courses—intelligent students would not be scared away from the profession. Of course, upgrading the training of high school teachers is not the only way to recruit more able applicants. As the European experience suggests, more money brings more status to any field.

Together, measures such as these can help teachers gain the respect of college professors, which now is often lacking. As more and more aspiring teachers graduate from college with honors, a long overdue rapport will develop between academics and schoolteachers. And such rapport is the first step toward bridging the gap between the American high school and the American college—and upgrading both of them.

