

The Five Day Work Week System and Changes in Living Culture

~Two Day-Off School System and Its Affects on Parents in Japan

SAWAI SEIKO (AKITA UNIVERSITY, JAPAN)

1. Kid's Opinions on the New Two Day Off School System in Japan

The following article is from a local newspaper in the Tohoku Region, which was printed, in early October of this year. It was written by a boy, third year student in junior high school. He writes of his opinions of the Five-Day School Week under the caption of "How will young people use their added extra time off effectively, in looking at the newly introduced five day School Week".

Seven months have now passed since the introduction of the five-day school week in Japan. In these few months already, many commentaters have quickly used the mass media to criticize the system saying that students' scholastic abilities will decline and that juvenile delinquency will surely increase. In general, one can say that it has been a rather negatively evaluated new start. Even parents say: "It seems that my kids have more time off to stay home and play video games" or "The kids play so hard on Saturdays and Sundays now that they are exhausted when they go back to school on Monday." Nearly all of the initial reactions are not positive about the new school system, which gives kids more personal time to spend on their own. Then, who will evaluate this new five day school week in a positive way? With both parents and kids having more time off to spend together, it seems that the Five-Day School Week would be a welcomed change. However, for kids who don't want to fall behind in their academic pursuits, will this just mean extra time spent at cram schools?

Before being swayed by all the negative reactions, it is first important to look back at

why the five-day school week was introduced in Japan in the first place. It was introduced so that people can have the right to decide more on their own, when and how, with whom, and where they will spend their personal and free time. If kids just zone out at home, that doesn't give a lot of meaning to the system. Hopefully, through community activities and other youth focused programs, students will be able to have more chances to take part in their community to discover more of the society around them, as well as have more time to casually interact with friends. The main point is that, students are not only now free to choose what they will do but also whether they will do anything at all. This is a serious issue that is now frequently addressed in the Japanese educational sphere. Instead of pushing forward for increased scholastic aptitude levels, there is first a deep feeling that the mental health needs of Japanese children must be seriously addressed today. Educators are hoping that more free, unstructured time away from the controlled and regulated school life, will help lead to more time available for family centered or communities activities, both which are relationships which are equally or perhaps more important than the solely school-life centered upbringing, which most youth experience. We will soon begin to see important changes made possible by the newly introduced five-day school week. But right now, it is just too early, while we are in a major transition period, to say how, quite yet. The new system that just started in April 2002, in Japan has opened a door for many possible activities beyond the confined classroom. Making use of our time well, that will be most important!

This was an article written by a student about her feelings for the newly introduced five-day school week, which just started in April, 2002. By looking at many of the reactions of parents and students, we can see that there is a rather large gap in philosophies about the new system within society. While parents look at school life as a single most important entity in a child's daily life, which is the primary tool for providing educational development; children on the other hand, express a strong desire and need to have more general freedom and personal time to spend on activities, which they are more personally motivated to do. Increased free time should foster more independence in children and a drive for personal responsibility in self-learning, something highly lacking in the educational environment up until now.

There are two, directly opposing views and attitudes between children and adults, which

now clearly comes to light as parents must unwillingly adapt their schedules in home life to deal with this new system.

Another reason that more parents look at the five day school week in a negative manner is that, especially for mothers, they see their workload in the home, such as meal preparations as expecting to increase, since they must provide more care for the children who stay at home.

It is here that I would like to look at the influences of the five-day school week on parents, children, and the family and think about how these new changes will influence home living patterns and family interaction. Since both labor hours for adults and study hours for students have been shortened, it is important to look at how daily life will now change and how society will need to make adaptations to deal with the new system.

We need to consider what efforts need to be made to help, both parents and children more positively and effectively deal with the shortened school week.

2. The Five Day Work Week in Japan

According to the Labor Standards Law which was enacted after World War II in 1947, all work hours (not including resting time) for adult men, women, and youth were set at a maximum of eight hours per day and forty-eight hours per week. In other words, a six-day work week, with only one day off, was set.

This system continued for the next forty years, and the legal labor standard of forty-eight work hours per week also continued. However, in the late 1960s, as Japan's economy was experiencing quick modernization and a great economic growth span, workers began demanding improved labor conditions. With increased earning power, laborers demanded shortened work hours, so that they could enjoy their improved socio-economic status. More personal time and freedom was the sign of their economic prosperity. Prosperity meant not only higher wages and shorter working hours, but also specifically the demand for a two-day weekend off. Although in legal form, it still remained at the originally set forty-eight hours per week, through labor negotiations, the six-day work week finally changed to the five-day

week in 1985.

The first time that the labor standards were brought to legal attention, in other words, the first time that the shortening of work hours were aggressively addressed in terms of our government policy, was in 1985. This was when the G5 Countries; at that time, America, Japan, Germany, France and England, got together in New York to sign the Plaza Accords.

Finally, in 1988, the Japanese Government changed the legal labor workweek to forty hours, instead of forty-eight. Thus, based on the five-day workweek, the yearly work hour average was able to be brought down to 1800 hours. In 1992, public servants started the five-day workweek. And in 1997, the forty-hour work week was considered standard practice for all.

However, the introduction of the two-day off work system spread slowly. As of January the first, 2001, according to the Labor Hours and Wages Department of the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, the total number of industries who have at least one day off per week is 91.6%. However, the number of industries who have fully introduced the five day work week is still at only 33.6%. Further, these statistics do not necessarily reflect that the two days off are on the weekend, Saturday and Sunday, nor are they practised two days off consecutively. They may land on different days throughout the week. This means that not all two-income couples may have two days off every week, nor are the days off necessarily the same. In other words, the two day off system is for the individual worker, not for the couple and the family unit.

Then, how do workers spend their day off?

According to an NHK survey on Lifestyles and Time conducted in the year 2000, regarding the ways people spend, their increasing free-time, free time activities were categorized as leisure activities, community activities, and interaction with people. It appears that with extra free time, people can spend more time with family members and friends, resting at home, listening to music, going out for drives, dining out, and lead a lifestyle based more on individual choices.

Now with more time made available, due to the newly introduced five-day workweek as well as five-day school week, hopes are made that people will have more time to participate in local community activities, as well as have more time to do volunteer work. However, in practice the number of people actually participating in local community events and volunteer

activities is still not high.

Participating in community groups or activities will have an increased effect for everyone: from consumers to the elderly, welfare services and education. Volunteer work is an important step in the development of each individual, who will become better able to understand their community and take a more active role in solving some of the social problems around them. This is an important stepping stone, which will better promote lifestyles which are focused on the individual and their personal choices and differences.

Each person's lifestyle is generally considered to be decided upon by an individual's personal philosophies however up until now, children under the age of fifteen have largely had their lifestyle molded by their parents' rigid and long working hours, as well as by long hours spent in school.

Up until now, workers have kept work at the center of their lives and withdrawn from community work. It appears that with extra free time, people will be able to spend more time with family members, listening to music, going out for drives and leading a lifestyle based more on individual choices. However, according to the NHK survey on Lifestyles and Time, the number of people participating in local events and doing volunteer activities is still not high, However the amount of time used used for leisure both on weekdays, an increase of two hours and the weekends, an increase of three hours, has shown a steady change.

In effect, society must be built on the values that people are free to choose on their own how they will manage and control their personal time. Without this basic concept kept in practice, it is hard to develop citizens with a sense of independence and who have a drive to volunteer when it is felt necessary.

3. The Five-Day School Week and its Influences on Home Life.

Before starting the Five Day School Week in April of 2002, there was a gradual adjustment period which first began in the Fall of 1992, which allowed for one Saturday off a month, and then from April of 1995, students were only attending school two Saturdays a month.

Since a five-day school week means a shortened number of work hours for teachers and increased free time, it was a naturally welcomed change among educators. And as I

mentioned at the beginning of my report, when I mentioned the newspaper article written by a youth on how young people should spend their increased time off with the Five Day School Week. Not only teachers but students are also highly enthused by the new system, and say that they increasingly look forward to their personal time they now have to play with friends, to relax, or just watch TV.

However, according to an article from the Yomiuri Newspaper March 31st of 2002, on this new concept of increased personal time in education, nearly 60% of the students parents were against the system. It was a survey conducted among 3,000 readers. And, in the special running articles on the subject, many sensationalized and dramatic headlines were used to catch the eyes of parents.

Some of the headlines ran: "67% against curriculum reductions", "66% of pre-school parents also against the Five Day School Week" "69% against the New Curriculum Outlines, saying that cut backs in curriculum content, will surely lead to a further decrease in student academics" and "75% feel that here needs to be new programs or ways to deal with the new system since academics are expected to decline." The strong, dismal reactions by parents were brought out to the forefront, by these regular running articles.

Targeting the strong insecurities of these parents, a large number of private schools consequently decided to maintain the six-day school week. Further, private cram schools have developed schedules starting early Saturday and Sunday mornings to compensate for the missed study time at the public schools.

With the Five-Day School Week, parent's fear that fewer children will be able to obtain the necessary scholastic skills in order to go on to good high schools and universities, and will continue to rely on cram schools. Parents also worry, that not only have the total number of classroom hours been cut, but with a 30% cut in curriculum material in all subjects, there is a definite worry that academic standards will surely drop.

Further, questions remain such as: Who is to watch children, now home on Saturdays, when parents may still have to work? Will more children just resort to video games and lazily lying around the home? Will this just lead to troubles, such as more delinquent behavior by children who have less structured time? Also, there is a worry that the stability of basic living patterns will be disturbed, as kids may not always be watched well on Saturdays while home alone.

As we can't turn back the clocks to a pre-Five Day School System, Japanese society is now faced with a serious debate as to how to effectively deal with both academic issues and with the effects on home life as well. The changes in the school system mean a change in boundaries in home life too. The system poses some serious issues for parents and society as well as for the children who will be raised in a more free-focused lifestyle, which better respects the choices of the individual.

To prevent a further drop in overall academic achievement, local governments need to introduce programs to support the new system: such a guidelines suggesting a morning reading practice in all schools, increased drill exercises or in the case of schools such as in Saitama Prefecture in the Kanto Region, students who voluntarily choose to come to school on Saturdays may be taught by part-time teachers, a program for students who feel that they still need the extra study time at the public school. Study regiments for home study may also be suggested, as parents are desperately trying to prevent their own children from dropping into the below-average, weak academic performance groups. Academic performance can not be evaluated solely on the quantity of facts and information that students have amassed, but also needs to be judged by the degree of self-motivation and desire for researching and investigating issues on one's own will, as well.

In other words, increased academic performance is surely dependent on each student's individual goals and sense of curiosity, to further pursue education for their own merits, not merely because of the push by parents nor the system itself. This recognition of the importance of self-motivation, will surely help lead, to the improved development of overall life skills for living and general sense of well-being and freedom, which is decidedly necessary for the youth in Japanese society today.

Also, one must address the worry that the stability of lifestyles will be interrupted with increased personal time. Not only parents, but also community groups and networks will need to make an effort to help provide positive and productive, interactive activities outside of school life for youth today. For example, some elementary schools have introduced a type of day-care service or youth club for kids after school, providing an interactive and safe location, for children whose parents are still working, in the daytime. According to a survey of 11,803 facilities in the year 2000, there were over 450,000 children, 90 percent being under the age of 10, who relied on public programs. With the increase of two -working parent

homes, it is particularly of great importance that community programs specifically target the needs of its citizens who are effected by the five week school system and continue to carry out programs with flexibility and openness, something quite unlike the frequently rigid systems, held into place up until now. Only at that point, will we surely be recognized as a society that acknowledges and respects the wide variety of differing lifestyles of its citizens. It is then, that the Five-Day School Week will naturally be seen as a much welcomed open door to more personal freedoms and development, and not the burden which so many people initially thought.