

The Link between Culture and Education : A View from the Nursery School

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The Link between Culture and Education: A View from the Nursery School

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Kenkyusha's Japanese-English dictionary suggests that *kyōyō* corresponds both to "education" and "culture" in English. The link between education and culture implied by the Japanese term is an interesting one, in view of research on Japanese education. A term which connotes both education and culture provides a convenient way for talking about two entities which may, in fact, be more closely linked in Japan than in the U.S.. This paper will explore the two meanings of *kyōyō* with respect to Japanese and American thinking about young children's development.

1. U.S. INTEREST IN JAPANESE SCHOOLING: EDUCATION, NOT CULTURE

Japanese education is now the focus of intense interest among American. For example, on recent consecutive Sundays two different studies of Japanese education occupied prominent spots on the front page of the New York Times. Stories focused on the superior test scores of Japanese students in mathematics and science, and on the greater "rigor" of Japanese schooling. The more demanding curriculum in Japanese schools and the higher expectations for student achievement were identified as important features of Japanese education.

In the great interest paid to Japanese education, the focus has been on comparative test scores, particularly in mathematics and the sciences, and on Japanese success in producing in the general population the high level of skills needed by industry. Little attention, in the United States, has been devoted to understanding the part of Japanese education connoted by "culture" as a meaning of *kyōyō*. Similarly, U.S. accounts of Japanese education have devoted little attention to liberal arts education. "Liberal arts education" is an additional translation for

kyōyō, according to Kenkyusha's dictionary.

Drawing on my own and others' research on Japanese education. I would like to ask what we can infer about *kyōyō* from looking at the child's earliest educational experiences, in nursery school and first grade. Obviously, a concept of *kyōyō* inferred from such a small segment of the individual's experience will not tell the whole story. However, experiences in nursery school and early elementary school represent the transition from home to society. In these earliest experiences, the society must teach the most important lessons about how to be a member of society, or must at least equip children cognitively, socially, and motivationally, to learn those lessons at some later time. My comments will be based on research conducted by Cummings [1980] and by Peak [1990], as well as on my own observations of 15 Japanese nursery schools [LEWIS 1984] and 15 Japanese first-grade classrooms [LEWIS 1987].

2. ARTS, AESTHETIC AND THE WHOLE CHILD

Examination of Japanese early education suggests several important questions with respect to U.S.-Japan concepts of *kyōyō*. First, is Japanese education more holistic than U.S. education, in the sense that it focuses on artistic, social, and other aspects of children's development, as well as on the cognitive tasks of education? If so, what are the implications for children? How might educational concern with the "whole child" shape a child's emerging concepts of what is an educated person? Cummings [1980] describes education of the "whole child" as a feature of Japanese elementary education. He reports that Japanese children devote more time to art and music than do their U.S. counterparts. The existence of specific age-graded national curriculum goals for art and music in Japan further suggests the importance of these goals. Since many groups in the U.S. have suggested "back to basics" as the educational solution to low achievement in U.S. schools, it is important to note that Japanese elementary schools achieve high levels of basic skills in addition to devoting considerable attention to aesthetic subjects. Further, physical education, hygiene, and daily life habits may all be accorded considerably more attention in Japanese schools than in U.S. schools. For example, U.S. observers of Japanese schools have been impressed by the elaborate dances learned for athletic festivals, the care with which children learn to don white gowns and serve food to their peers, and the classroom emphasis on health and on interpersonal skills. Peak's [1990] ethnography of a Japanese first grade suggests that even learning to arrange possessions in one's desk can be made into a fine art. The class she described repeatedly practiced such basic maneuvers as stowing backpacks in desks, and the children learned to be sensitive to the minute details of this "routine" action. Likewise, posters displayed in Japanese classrooms show correct postures for writing, reading, and standing, and correct configurations for arranging desk contents. Items to be brought to school (down to the number of pencils) are often prescribed.

The great attention devoted to non-academic and procedural matters in Japanese early educational settings may be of interest for several reasons. First, Japanese children may be exposed to a much broader notion of what is an educated-cultured person than are their U.S. counterparts. Research on U.S. classrooms suggests the central importance of *academic* subjects. Given the importance of the entrance examination system in Japan, I would expect that this would be true also in the higher grades in the Japanese educational system. But would this be true in the early grades? It may be that the emphasis on aesthetic subjects, and the emphasis on the aesthetic aspects of daily life experiences, in early education, may have a lasting impact on children's views of what constitutes a good student and a fully developed human being. In Japanese early education, "culture" and "education," two meanings of *kyōyō*, may be more closely linked than they are in the U.S..

Second, the focus on procedure in Japanese classrooms may teach appreciation of the *process* of engaging in activities: how it feels to sit properly, how it feels to arrange objects neatly, how it sounds to stow away a backpack quietly, etc.. Experimental research conducted in the U.S. reveals that, when children are encouraged to attend only to the final accomplishment of a drawing task, by means of a reward for completion of the task, the children produce much less creative pictures; presumably, attention to the reward undermines children's attention to the *process* of drawing. Children so rewarded are also less likely to engage in drawing again in a situation in which they are not rewarded. Thus, the process orientation reported in Japanese early education may promote a keener appreciation of how to do things (academic as well as non-academic) and a commitment to doing things in certain ways. A certain care and attentiveness to *how* things are done, as well as to the final product, may thus be an aspect of the Japanese concept of *kyōyō*. Singleton and Singleton's study of Japanese pottery-making, as well as other treatises on Japanese arts, have noted the emphasis on process, rather than simply outcome.

A third intriguing aspect of the procedural drills seen in Japanese first grades is whether they may be linked to the learning of persistence. When asked why she had children repetitively practice tasks, one first-grade teacher answered, "Children learn the pleasures of hard work through non-academic activities. Academic subjects are not a good way of teaching the rewards of hard work to first-graders." As Rohlen [1976] has noted, repeated rote practice, and imitation of a prescribed form, is, within many Japanese art forms, more than a way to learn: it is a form of spiritual training. *Seishin* is also identified by Befu [1977] as a fundamental element of Japanese behavior. To what extent does the Japanese concept of *kyōyō* incorporate the capacity to learn by persistence, repeated practice, and submission to a prescribed form? U.S. views on the role of procedural learning in classrooms tend to be somewhat scattered. Although U.S. research has shown that teachers who spend time explicitly teaching and rehearsing rules at the beginning of the school year have more efficiently managed classrooms later in the year [EMMER, Evertson & ANDERSON 1980], there is also a tendency to poke fun at teachers who spend time teaching non-academic procedures. The relationship between U.S. no-

tions of the educated-cultured person and ability to persist and to skillfully follow prescribed forms is probably unsystematic.

3. SOCIALIZATION BY PEERS

An essential component of the "cultured" person is a certain set of attitudes. While the specific content of these attitudes no doubt varies historically and across cultures, I would argue that Japanese and U.S. concepts share many components. For example, an acceptance that learning (in some form) is valuable, the ability to acquire knowledge within a society, and the motivation to do so would all seem to be attributes of the cultured person shared across Japanese and U.S. societies. How are these attributes acquired?

Japanese and U.S. early education appear to differ dramatically in the means by which children come to accept the value of the rules and discipline that make knowledge acquisition possible. Casual observers of Japanese education have tended to see the substantial discipline, uniformity, and order of Japanese classrooms and to conclude that authoritarian control processes must be at work. Closer observation of nursery schools have suggested just the opposite: that teachers have a low profile as authorities, and that peers, rather than teachers, are responsible for much of the discipline. For example, in all of the 15 Japanese first-grade classrooms I visited, children were responsible for such aspects of classroom management as calling the class to order, leading greetings or closing ceremonies, and leading the transitions from one activity (such as lunch) to another (such as academic work). It is interesting that some of the activities considered the most difficult for teachers to manage, according to U.S. research studies, are managed by *children* in Japan. I suspect that some of the authority exercised even by Japanese first-graders—such as checking whether other children had eaten enough to go outside or deciding which group was quiet enough to be dismissed first—would make most Americans quite uncomfortable. Quite possibly, Americans would worry about whether children could be sufficiently fair and could rise above their own self-interest.

In Japanese nursery schools, children's fixed groups seem to be one way of teaching children to cooperate with other children and to treat them fairly. To U.S. observers, children's groups, usually composed of approximately six children, are a striking feature of Japanese nursery school life. As children in these groups work on cooperative projects, eat lunch together, and share responsibility for important tasks such as looking after class pets, they learn how to work as a group. Similarly, a system of rotating monitors, or *toban*, provides all children, regardless of ability or achievement, opportunities to be authority figures in the classroom, and to learn, in the words of one teacher "how hard other children can make it for you, and how nice it is when others help."

What are the implications of the Japanese peer group's considerable role in socialization of children? Does the greater role of the peer group, and lesser role of adult authority, in early Japanese education have any impact on concepts of the

educated-cultured person? When a child is not paying attention and neglects to obtain lunch for his peers, what is the impact of being reprimanded by the teacher vs. being hit on the back by angry group-mates (to take an actual example from field notes)? First, the Japanese system may result in fewer failures of socialization than its U.S. counterpart. Several factors might tend to make the Japanese system more effective in leading children to be committed to adult values. During the years of early education, a child's sense of himself or herself as a "good child" is rather fragile as it emerges. Peer sanctions may pose much less of a threat to the child's emerging good child identity than do teachers sanctions. As a consequence, the Japanese system may result in a larger number of children who think of themselves as good children, and who become committed to the basic values presented to them. Further, when peers do much of the management of other children's behavior, adult authority may be able to remain much more benevolent. Japanese teachers of nursery school and first grade go out of their way to help children feel in control of the rules and practices in the classroom. For example, teachers take great pains to have decisions about classroom rules and chores emerge "naturally" from the children. This may promote a greater commitment to rules and procedures, but also a greater resistance to rules that are not derived by this process of mutual commitment. As a result of all these processes that tend to promote internalization of values, a large proportion of Japanese children may view the status of educated-cultured person as one which they wish to emulate. This may be particularly true if, as argued above, this role contains a wider range of attributes than in the U.S. and thus is one with which a variety of students, not just the most intellectually gifted students, can identify.

A second sense in which peer socialization may influence the concept of the educated-cultured person is that certain interpersonal skills may become part of the concept. The U.S. concept of the educated-cultured person is, I think, asocial. I do not know whether this is also true in Japan. Observers of Japanese industry have commented that interpersonal astuteness, the ability to understand others' perspectives and reason about them, is a form of Japanese creative genius. A rather simple example of this interpersonal astuteness is the fact that it occurred first to Japanese manufacturers to design a wristwatch that signals Moslem prayer times, to be marketed to Middle Eastern consumers. I do not know to what extent the ability to perceive the emotional state, needs, and perspectives of others is a component of the concept the educated-cultured person in Japan. This presents an interesting topic for discussion.

4. REFLECTION AND SELF-CRITICISM

A third aspect of Japanese early education which may be related to Japanese-U.S. differences in notions of the educated-cultured person centers on reflection and self-criticism. U.S. studies make little mention of group or individual self-criticism as strategies for managing classrooms. Both in Japanese nursery schools and first

grades, teachers frequently encourage children to criticize themselves and their own group's performance. Rather than being done in an accusatory or remonstrative fashion, the mood is often one of heartfelt sharing of weakness, and group support for efforts at self-improvement. To a U.S. observer, the tone may seem more like Sunday School or a scout meeting than like school. For example, teachers may engage children in discussions of what they did and did not like about school, whether they had fought or done something naughty during the preceding week, how well they were accomplishing their goals, and whether animals and other joint class property were being cared for well. The day before the school athletics festival, a teacher asked her class to discuss what it meant to "do your utmost" in different situations that would arise the next day, such as a running race, a team game, watching the older children dance, and listening to the school officials speak. Children then volunteered the activities in which they wanted to do their utmost. Although most children mentioned athletic activities, the teacher praised most highly a child who said "sitting still while the teachers are talking." The teacher said "she really deserves praise, because she wants to do well at the thing which is most difficult for her. You all know she's often cautioned for talking. Tomorrow everyone will be watching her, and she wants to do her utmost."

Another form in which self-reflection and self-improvement are evident in Japanese classrooms for young children is the "gambari-*hyo*," a chart which identifies individual goals for self-improvement. These are quite different from the *academic* progress charts often found in U.S. classrooms, in that the goals are identified by children and might pertain to any aspect of the child's activities. For example, in one *gambari-hyo*, children had identified such diverse goals as: "getting up early," "becoming really fast at running," "not punching children on the playground," "being nice to my sister," and "eating my lunch faster." An educational cartoon designed to be shown in ethics classes in first grade classrooms features an animal that misses out on exciting experiences because it just can't seem to wake up early, and it is designed to stimulate discussion on self-improvement. Group self-criticism is another feature of early Japanese education which is striking to U.S. observers. For example, a first grade teacher may ask all the members of the class to observe who is following the rules of a dance, so that the class can later engage in self-criticism. A social studies lesson asks children to name the tasks their mothers do for the family, and to reflect on ways the students could help their mothers.

Stevenson and colleagues have found that U.S. mothers, in comparison to Japanese mothers, tend to have a consistently more optimistic view of their children's ability, performance, schooling, and so forth. Within each country, individual mothers are equally accurate in telling how well their children do (in comparison to other children). Yet, U.S. mothers as a whole tend to rate their children's accomplishments, schooling, and so forth, as better than average. Perhaps the absence of emphasis on self-criticism and reflection, results in an overly optimistic view. Perhaps a capacity for self-criticism, reflection, and even humility

is a stronger component of Japanese, than U.S., concepts of the educated-cultured person.

SUMMARY

Evidence on Japanese nursery school and first grade education provides a window on the first systematic institutional influences on children's concepts of the educated-cultured person. While it provides only a partial picture of the many influences on this concept, it does raise some interesting questions. First, Japanese early education, in comparison with its U.S. counterpart, may emphasize a broader range of aspects of the child's development, including artistic, musical, physical, and competence in daily life habits and interpersonal skills. U.S. schooling may be more narrowly academic in its focus. If so, the Japanese concept of the educated-cultured person may be one which includes a greater array of abilities—from an appreciation of the aesthetics of eating lunch to an ability to persist on a task.

Second, the greater role of peers, and lower profiles of adult authority figures, in Japanese early education relative to U.S. practices, may result in a broader acceptance of the value of education, a belief that authority is generally benevolent, and an importance of interpersonal skills in the concept of the educated-cultured person. Third, self-criticism and reflection on one's own performance, and the link of these qualities to self-improvement and spiritual training, may be components of the Japanese concept of the educated-cultured person which are absent from the U.S. concept.

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