

# Japanese educational system and competitiveness in children ( I )

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In this paper, the aspects of Japanese child development, Japanese family education, and preschool educational system were discussed. Approximately, 93 percent of the children attend at least 2 years of pre-elementary education (2001). At the foundation of Japanese children's self-discipline there are several practices: (a) Children help shape classroom rules and norms, (b) build their identification with authority, (c) reflect on their behavior, (d) and such reflection may build an enduring habit of self-evaluation.

Key words: educational system, preschool, Japan, competitiveness

## Japanese child development in Japan

In Japan, preschool is an increasingly common solution to the problem of how to care for, socialize, and educate children between infancy and the compulsory schooling. Pre-elementary options include both full-day childcare centers geared to the needs of working parents (hoikuen) and half-day preschools (yochien). Approximately, more than 93 percent of the children attend at least 2 years of pre-elementary education (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2001). In Japan, 57.4 percent of the four- and five-year-olds (1,372,000) are enrolled in kindergartens, and 36.0 percent of four- and five-year-olds (861,000) are enrolled in day nurseries. Japanese children are enrolled in kindergartens, day nurseries, day-care centers, or group-care homes. Recently, the increasing nuclearization and gentrification of the family brought on by a shrinking birthrate, an ongoing migration of young people from expanded households in the country to single-family apartments in large cities, and the rise of the middle-class salaried employee life-style have led Japanese parents to believe that preschools offer their children their best chance of learning to function in a large

group and of becoming to encourage the establishment of peer relationships and group interaction (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989). Japanese child development has attracted the interest of cross-cultural investigators in recent years. There are several reasons for this interest. One is that several studies have shown Japanese children as a group to be among the highest achievers in international comparisons of educational attainment. Also, a number of studies suggest that the Japanese childrearing culture provides a natural experiment that may suggest alternatives to the western model of child-rearing practices (Doi, 1973; Hendry, 1986)

Pioneering studies conducted by cultural anthropologists have increased the awareness of cultural variations in traditions and practices of child-rearing. Studies of child development in different cultural settings offer important contributions to our understanding of psychological development. During the last two decades, cross-cultural studies of psychological development have stimulated reformulation of major theories and contributed new concepts of childrearing and education (White, 1987; Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989).

A limitation of such studies is that cultural variables co-vary with the degree of industrialization

of the society which, in turn, affects the standard of living, family structure, levels of nutrition and education, and often even the available means of living. This covariation makes interpretation of observed facts difficult, especially when the interactions among childrearing, education, and intellectual development are under consideration.

Japan equals any western country in terms of industrialization, per capita income, education, and employment yet it has its own traditional culture of childrearing and education. East and West are two cultures, and pre and post industrialization also represent two different cultures. In Japan, we can observe the interaction of these two sets of cultures. Japanese culture is a complex system of many finely differentiated regional, occupational, sociocultural, and generational subcultures that are, nevertheless, integrated into a distinct culture.

A less mentioned, but equally important reason for studying child development in Japan, is that the country is undergoing rapid and drastic sociocultural change. To be sure, every culture is in transition. But the extent of change that Japan has experienced during the last 100 years — a shift from quasi-feudalistic tranquility to the furious pace of a future-oriented industrial center — is perhaps unparalleled among industrialized nations.

### **The Formation of Japanese Culture: A Quick History**

One interesting characteristic in the history of Japan's interaction with other cultures is its cyclic alternation of open and closed periods. Before the third century, however, interaction among Asian regions was scarce. Then came a period of massive importation of learning from the continent which laid the foundation for the future civilization. A writing system was brought from China to Japan in the sixth century. With it came Buddhism, as well as various schools of Chinese philosophy. A massive flow of Chinese culture into the country was seen till the eighth century. Then a period of relative isolation followed.

The Japan Sea, which separated Japan from the Asian continent, served an important role in fostering Japanese culture. It allowed Japan to close

itself off from time to time, thus moderating the impact of foreign cultures by allowing the Japanese to be selective about what arrived from abroad. These periods of relative seclusion permitted foreign influences to be assimilated and Japanized and old influences to be preserved.

In 1854, with the reopening of the country, efforts were begun to absorb western civilization as efficiently as possible. Deliberate moves were made to westernize Japan's legal, governmental, economic, and educational systems.

But by far the strongest impact on Japan came with the post-World War II internationalization. This latest form of outside influence differed from previous incarnations because it occurred when the Japanese were at their lowest ebb, experiencing the full misery of a defeat. But fueled by the subsequent economic success, sociocultural reform has continued at a rapid rate.

Many elements of western culture are evident in Japan, but these exist alongside of elements from the period of almost perfect isolation that ended only a little more than 100 years ago.

### **The Structure of Childrearing in Japan**

Some questions about Japanese childrearing are expressed by a researcher (Lewis, 1995): How Japanese teachers learn their approach to discipline. How much is learned in teacher education courses? How much comes from their own childhood experiences? Shimahara & Sakai (1992) suggests that the training of new teachers emphasizes techniques for establishing warm, close relationships between teachers and students. Some postwar "democratic" educational philosophies actually continue traditional Japanese ideals regarding the relationship between students and teachers. Mothering is a logical starting point for a discussion of childrearing. For example, when misbehavior occurs, then Japanese discipline tends to be emotional, not legalistic or mechanical. It appeals to feelings and to the child's bonds to teachers and other children. Often it tries to strengthen those bonds. The Japanese discipline is contrasted clearly with behavioral approaches such as "assertive discipline" that are found in many

Western cultures. Behavioral approaches focus on controlling immediate behavior—through rewards and punishments—rather than on building the child's bonds to others or on promoting the child's long-term internalization of values.

Oriental family culture in general has been commonly understood to be patriarchies. Possessing systems and ethics imported from China, the Japanese family did not deviate from this norm. The head of the family usually was the senior male member, and the male heir succeeded him in this position. The legal status of women was weak.

The emphasis on dependency in the structuring of social values and social roles differs from western practice, where parents try to make their children independent as early as possible. Japanese parents want to keep the child closely interdependent with them. The feeling of interdependence helps the child assimilate the hopes and values of the parents, thus enhancing the child's educability. In the past, when people were expected to follow rules and traditions rather than to become independent individuals, this was an ingenious way of socialization. Social institutions designed for different age levels gradually shifted the object of the child's dependency from mother to peers and then to community. It is conceivable that with social modernization, and its emphasis on individual initiative and interpersonal competition, this subtly gradated transition may no longer be possible.

The system which implicitly presupposes this mechanism may be difficult for those raised in a different culture to understand. The Japanese school system has followed the western model for more than 100 years. Today, what takes place in a typical Japanese classroom does not differ greatly from that of a traditional western school. Nevertheless, Japanese schools remain Japanese in many subtle ways.

It has often been pointed out that Japanese attitudes toward self-expression are quite different from western attitudes. Nagashima (1993) has pointed out that in contrast to the West, where it is the sender's responsibility to produce a coherent, clear, and intelligible message, in Japan, it is the receiver's responsibility to make sense out of the message. For a Japanese, to express himself or herself too clearly

is impolite. It shows deficient empathy; the listener puts the speaker in the position of having to express his or her own opinions too clearly. Such an attitude helps avoid confrontation, an adaptation well suited to people destined to live for generations in a restricted area without much room for mobility. In the classroom, this view of the nature of messages characterizes the interaction process. The teacher avoids excessive prescriptiveness. The student may ask questions but should not force the teacher to confess ignorance.

In recent years many Japanese children have been raised and educated outside Japan because of their parents' jobs. Such children provide an interesting glimpse into the differences between cultures, for their education after returning has become a major problem in Japanese education. More troublesome than obvious problems like language handicaps are the scripts, or schemata, the returnees have acquired abroad about how to deal with peers, adults, teachers, and school classes. If a child's first schooling was in the United States or England, he or she would have acquired, for example, a script for success in school, emphasizing independence, clarity, and uniqueness — quite un-Japanese values.

Minoura (1984) has followed up children who attended schools in the United States for several years and entered Japanese schools in their teens. One of her cases is a boy named Jiro, who moved to the United States at age 6, returned to Japan at age 13 1/2, and went back to the United States at age 16 1/2.

*Jiro developed a sound understanding of both cultures and had clear feelings of identity as a Japanese, yet he found the American way more agreeable. His first frustration when he returned to Japan after 6 years of schooling in the United States involved the lack of clarity with which his friends expressed themselves. In part, some of his difficulty may have been caused by problems with the language. But at age 13, this deficit would not have signified a serious handicap in oral communication. Jiro said that he thought his American friends expressed themselves much more clearly. He discovered another source of frustration in the pressure to conform, symbolized by school uniforms and the custom of respecting upper graders for their seniority alone. These were also the most frequent complaints by*

*teen-age returnees from English-speaking countries in a survey. When Jiro was interviewed again as a high school student in the United States, he compared Japan and the United States in the following way:*

*In Japan you will not be acceptable unless you keep up with others. In the United States there is a lot of diversity. It is all right if you are happy with it. Things don't go that way in Japan. When I returned to the United States I felt relieved. I thought that now I could assert myself without worrying about conforming to others. But the other hand, it was difficult. Here you have to make decisions yourself. There is no set pattern like there was in Japan. Looking back, it was easy in Japan. Others tell you what you should do and you just do that. The table is ready and you will even be helped with chopsticks. Here in the U.S. you should always be alert and support yourself, or you will drop out.*

Jiro's statement describes the typical climate of Japanese schools—maternalistic protection and indulgence on the one hand and pressure to conform to the group on the other. Another characteristic of Japanese schools, which is often pointed out, is the severe competition for achievement. In Japan, everyone is supposed to be equal; therefore, it is the effort expended to pass the hard examinations that proves one's merit for better positions. This mixture of protectiveness, conformity, and competition may make the schools effective in some circumstances but highly stressful in others.

## Self-Discipline

Lewis (1995) described that even when teachers were physically present, they often took a low profile as authority figures, responding to children's misbehavior with questions or explanations — not demands.

*"A 5-year-old boy at Private University Preschool is throwing sand and calling it snow. The teacher asks him to stop, but he continues. She asks him twice more, explaining how it could hurt others' eyes. But he continues to make it "snow." The teacher suggests that he make a racetrack from the sand and see how fast cars can travel, but he brings more sand to throw. The teacher says, "If you fill up the tunnel with snow you can't have a race." He continues to "snow"*

*sand. Shrugging her shoulders, the teacher turns to a student teacher and says, "It's no use. They want to make it snow no matter what you do." The teacher walks away; but she later raises the incident as a topic of discussion during the going-home meeting. Four boys at Tokyo Central Ward Preschool Number One are building a tower in a classroom doorway. The teacher says, "It's crowded here. I know a better spot." They ignore her and continue building. "Look, if you go over there, no one will bump into your tower and knock it down," the teacher continues. The boys continue building, ignoring the teacher. She walks away,*

*On the playground of Our Shepherd Preschool, a teacher sees a 5-year-old boy throw a stone. Teacher: "What did you just do?" Boy: "I threw a stone." Teacher: "Why?" Boy: "To surprise him." Teacher: "Can you think of any other ways of surprising him?" Boy is silent. Teacher: "How would you feel if I threw a stone at your eye? Do you think your friend is different?" The teacher pats the boy on the shoulder to send him off to play.*

*Students at a middle-class Tokyo elementary school have just returned to school after vacation. The daily monitors are trying to quiet the class, but students are noisily visiting and practicing karate moves on one another. It takes the daily monitors 17 minutes to quiet the class for the morning meeting, as various groups of children leave their seats to talk or play at karate. During this time, the teacher sits at the front of the classroom waiting but does not say a word. He later raises the incident during a class meeting and asks children to discuss why it took them so long to quiet down and what they were feeling during the 17 minutes. (Lewis, 1995; p.116-117)*

Teachers often responded to misbehavior with questions, explanations, or discussions. A research on Japanese and American mothers' disciplinary strategies underlines the importance of harmony in adult-child relations (Conroy, Hess, Azuma, & Kashiwagi, 1980). Japanese mothers and teachers focused on feelings and the results of consequences of the child's behaviors: "You wouldn't want to be hurt by a block like that"; "Vegetables will help you grow strong and healthy"; "The store owner has worked

hard to arrange the shelves neatly” (In contrast, American mothers and teachers assert their own authority and/or cite impersonal rules: “I told you not to do that” or “Blocks are not for throwing.” (Lewis, 1995; pp.117).

Personhood in Japan is not totally defined by interpersonal relationships. Another important component is based on the quality of self, for which there is no English equivalent. “Self-discipline” may be used as a kind of rough shorthand as long as it is understood to express the complex set of concepts described here. Japanese believe that a person’s character is shaped by a mental substance called variously *ki*, *kokoro*, *tamashii*, and *seishin*. *Ki* refers to the basic life force that gives a person the vitality to live. *Kokoro*, often translated as “soul,” is not a neutral soul but a sympathetic and erapathetic one. *Tamashii* is “elan vital,” including the determination to overcome all odds. *Seishin*, sometimes clumsily translated as “spirit,” is a mental attitude that helps a person tackle a task. These noncorporeal substances – and they are conceived of as substantive – make self-discipline possible.

But a substance needs to pass through the crucible of experience before self-discipline is achieved. The experience necessarily involves hardship (*kuro*), endurance (*gaman*, *nintai*, *shimbo*, *gambaru*), effort (*doryoku*), and the utmost self-exertion (*isshokenmei*). “If you try hard, you can do it” (*yareba dekiru*) is a well-worn phrase used to exhort people to try against all odds because spiritual substance will make it possible to overcome material hurdles – but only by trying very hard. Lebra’s survey (1976) of the sentence completion test demonstrates this emphasis on self-discipline. Over 70 percent of Japanese respondents—youths and adults, men and women—attributed success to diligence, effort, and the English words endurance, perseverance, and hardship do not connote the strong positive value inherent in the Japanese equivalents, which, in effect, exhort Japanese to undergo Spartan experiences, defined as good in themselves.

Experience in self-discipline is often conceived of as training. It used to be said that to become a mature person, a person has to “eat someone else’s rice,” that is, to be away from home and living in a setting where it is necessary to defer to others and to

endure psychological and material hardships. At present, companies send their employees to training institutes, where self-discipline is a major component of the curriculum.

In sum, at the foundation of Japanese children’s self-discipline there are several practices:

- Children help shape classroom rules and norms. They feel committed to rules and norms they have helped shape.
- All children – whatever their behavior or abilities – regularly lead the class, an experience likely to build their identification with authority.
- Children contribute daily to the well-being of classmates through chores and other activities.
- Children frequently reflect on their behavior and discuss how it relates to such values as kindness and responsibility. Such reflection may build an enduring habit of self-evaluation. (Lewis, 1995; pp.122).

### **Japanese school educational system and children’s actual activities in kindergartens**

In fact, after the war, Japan has made remarkable progress in the fields of economy and scientific technology, so the post war education is said to have contributed greatly to this drastic growth.

Today’s Japan offers a great variety of learning opportunities in many different places and in many different forms.

In the field of school education, there are kindergartens, elementary schools, lower secondary schools, upper secondary schools, universities, special training colleges and miscellaneous schools, etc.

At the preschool level, there are kindergartens and day nurseries which enroll about 1,372 thousands of and 861 thousands of children respectively.

Kindergartens admit children aged 3,4 or 5 and provide them with one-to-three-year courses. Although non-compulsory, kindergarten enrollments have drastically increased in recent years as parents have come to view them as a necessary prerequisite for their children’s success in Japan’s highly competitive educational system. In fact over 90% of children attend kindergartens and day nurseries.

Postwar school education system consists of

the so-called 6-3-3-4 school ladder.

Statistics show that Japanese education to be among the most successful systems in the world in providing broad access to higher levels of schooling.

At the compulsory education level, elementary and lower secondary school enroll nearly all the children of the relevant age group (from 6 to 15 years of age) approximately 14 million, almost 100% of the age group. While attending school, many of them also participate in extracurricular activities on a private basis as well as private classes on school subjects.

At the upper secondary level after compulsory education, there exist upper secondary schools, special training colleges offering upper secondary courses and so on, in which approximately 5.8 million students (94% of the age group) are enrolled.

As for higher education institutions, there are universities, graduate schools, junior colleges, colleges of technology, special training colleges and so on, which are attended by approximately 3.9 million students, 35% of the age group. Education in Japan has generally been evaluated highly in the world. They praise the excellence and superiority of Japanese education. As proof of excellence, they point to such features as a broad and detailed national curriculum, tightly regulated course hours, the quality and availability of school facilities and equipment, the equality of education, the use of groups in the classroom, and the superior achievement of Japanese students in international comparative studies.

Then let's go on to how school education is scheduled in Japan. The Japanese school year begins on April 1st and ends on March 31st of the following year. Most schools and kindergartens adopt three-term school year; from April to July, September to December, and January to March. Curricular regulations are very strict in Japan, and curriculum standards are prescribed in the Course of Study, issued by Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. The Course of Study provides the basic framework for curricula; the aim of each subject and the aims and content of teaching at each grade, and the number of class hours for each subject. Similarly, textbooks are written to accord with the national course of study. Organization, content, and textbook materials are the same in whichever school you may be educated. Each school organizes its own curricu-

lum on the basis of the Course of Study, taking into consideration the actual conditions of the community and the school itself, and the developmental level and characteristics of the pupils.

### **An example of science teaching in elementary schools.**

1. Teaching plans are very detailed. They pre-determine course content, distribution of time and questions to be asked.
2. Japanese teachers often follow the prediction – discussion – experiment format to stimulate creative thinking and inquiry by students.
3. Japanese teachers emphasize group interaction during discussions.
4. About classroom procedures, Japanese teachers begin with divergent discussion, encouraging children to express their own ideas and predictions. Gradually, however, discussion focuses on major issues or questions that teachers have prepared in advance. Teachers take the leading role in the discussion, guiding students to prescribed conclusions. These teaching methods enable teachers to deliver a certain amount of knowledge to students very effectively.

As mentioned before, Japanese children are said to be competent for educational attainment but this is not what Japanese education aims at. According to the Fundamental Law of Education, education shall aim at the full development of personality, striving for the rearing of people, sound in mind and body, who shall love truth and justice, esteem individual value, respect labor, have a deep sense of responsibility, and be imbued with an independent spirit, as builders of the peaceful state and society.

In spite of these benefits of the Japanese educational system, there are many difficulties we confront today, such as the highly competitive nature of entrance examinations for higher education, the high stress and anxiety of both students and parents, and the increasing incidence of secondary school violence. But an educator says that change can begin with one small step, especially when it concerns trying to save today's troubled Japanese youngsters, who are said to have become less patient and more violent in recent years. In fact, the Central

Council for Education released a report that listed 87 ways to nurture and discipline children at home as well as at school and in their communities. The report includes some basic suggestions such as “communicate more with children” or “strictly teach and correct children regarding their wrongdoings.”

Some people see the root of the abnormal situation with children in a postwar society that has made economic success its prime goal. As a result, for many people, academic background has become synonymous with personal value. This has intensified the war of college entrance examinations and made children's lives stressful. Others say that Japanese have been busy pursuing their own interests and this is what has made human relations shallow in the society as well as at home. As the report suggests, it is high time for us educators and parents to discuss what is important and necessary in nurturing children.

Throughout the year, plants show various changes as one season changes into another one. When plants meet the cold of winter, they fall off their leaves and look as if they were dead. But if the roots are not damaged, you do not have to worry. They will sprout young leaves again when the right time comes. Can we compare early childhood to the root of a plant? If children experience and absorb what are inevitable for them in their childhood, I am sure they will grow steadily against many troubles. We educators are so-to-speak gardeners to nurture children. We should be very careful in giving them the right manure at the right stage of growth.

Then at what stage and what kind of fertilizer

should we give children to have the energy to grow up appropriately? As the proverb says, “As the boy, so the man”, early childhood education should have a great influence on the acquisition of such motives.

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(to be continued)