

Japan's Schools: Five Lessons

Footnotes

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by Gail Benjamin
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*This essay is based on a lecture given by Gail Benjamin on October 7, 1997, and draws on her new book *Japanese Lessons: A Year in a Japanese School through the Eyes of an American Anthropologist and Her Children* (NYU Press, 1997). Dr. Benjamin discussed five lessons that American educators might usefully draw from the structure of early education in Japan.*

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1. Focus on Social Development

We are all aware that not everything learned in school is academic. It is in school that Japanese children confront the paradox inherent in social life: while social existence requires that every person sacrifice aspects of his or her individuality in order to meet the demands of group life, it is only by functioning as part of groups that individuals can achieve truly rewarding, virtuous, and meaningful lives. This understanding of the human condition is not uniquely Japanese, but compared to many other people, the Japanese have given their schools a large role in teaching this understanding to children.

2. Standardization Provides Equal Opportunity for All

Ninety-nine percent of Japanese children attend public elementary schools. These schools are supported by a taxation system that operates to ensure that, within very small limits, the funds available for each child's education are the same in every city, town, and village in Japan. If wealthy neighborhoods, cities, or prefectures want to increase their spending on education, they must be willing to increase educational spending in every school district in the country, and bear the tax burden of doing so.

If it is only fair that resources are standardized throughout Japan, then it is also only fair that the experiences children have in the schools should be equal too. Embedded in this approach is the idea that experiences have long-term effects, and that a standard experience will produce similar effects in most children. The notion that experience is more important than innate differences for the development of children—and adults—is a very strong one in Japan.

The first and most important component of this standardization policy is the national curriculum, for which the Japanese Ministry of Education provides detailed guides each school year. This curriculum is not by any stretch minimalistic. It is demanding for both teachers and students, who frequently complain that it is too hard. It gives the best students as much scope as they need, but it is not possible for the slowest students to master it all.

Included in the standardized national curriculum are guidelines for non-academic activities: the ways in which lunch time is administered, the format for the daily cleaning of the school the activities that are appropriate for Art Day and Sports Day, and annual trips for each grade level. (In Japanese schools there are no janitors; children keep the classrooms, hallways, bathrooms, and grounds clean.)

If the children in the wealthiest, most academically ambitious neighborhood in Tokyo go on a four-day class trip to the beach during summer vacation, then the children from the poorest industrial neighborhood also go on the same trip that year.

3. Educate All Children in the Same Way

In line with this view that experience, rather than innate differences, are important in education and socialization, the Japanese have adopted the view that public schools should educate all children, regardless of their backgrounds— and do it all the same way. Consequently, there is no tracking by academic ability, or any other factor, during elementary and junior high school. There are no magnet schools, no enrichment programs, no remedial programs. Within each school, students are assigned to classrooms in such a way that each room has an equal mix and an equal range of academic abilities in it.

To most Americans, putting children of different abilities together with a uniform curriculum in classrooms with no academic tracking seems like a recipe for disaster. But the results of this policy in elementary level performance are clear: the best Japanese students do better on international achievement tests than do the best American students, the average students in Japan are higher achievers than the average students in America, and the lowest ranking students in Japanese elementary schools outscore the lowest achievers in American schools.

4. Teachers Are Mentors, Not Autocrats

Under the Japanese system, teachers do not give grades to children in any way that matters or that has life consequences. Consider how this affects the dynamics of teaching. In America, a teacher holds the power and the authority to affect the future of a student by giving poor grades that will determine what school a student may attend later, by failing a student and not allowing that student to enter the next level of education, or by determining which opportunities within the school a student can access. Such a power relationship has the potential to corrupt both the dominant adult and the subordinate youth.

In Japan the important evaluation points for students are entry exams to the next academic level, not, as here, the exit exams after a course of study. While grades and report cards are taken seriously in Japan as indicators of success and where further efforts are needed, they don't have other consequences. Nobody fails. Nobody repeats a year. Nobody is denied participation in activities. Nobody is cut off from further education by grades— only by exam scores. Hence, the antagonism that American students often develop for their all-powerful teachers is far less prevalent among Japanese students, who are more likely to direct their frustration towards the big bad national Ministry of Education. As the teacher is perceived as only trying to help all of her students over of the various hurdles set by these anonymous examiners, there is less teacher-student hostility in the classroom, which yields an atmosphere more conducive to learning. This examination process of course produces its own frustrations and anxieties, but they are distinct from those generated by the grading system in American schools.

Teachers also adopt a series of interactional strategies to make their own role in learning less heavy-handed. They skillfully avoid telling individual students whether their answers to questions are right or wrong, and instead encourage other students to perform this evaluation. Teachers manipulate classroom discussions, but almost never give overt evaluations. Class meetings are held regularly, or as needed, to deal with discipline issues. "Solutions" are arrived at via student discourse rather than through teacher fiat. Thus a degree of student consensus is obtained without the open use of authority by the teacher.

5. Fun in Indispensable

Surprisingly, I think one explanation for the superior level of academic achievement in Japanese schools is the way that educators strive to incorporate fun into the learning process, the rationale being that after learning to have fun together through non-academic activities, children are better prepared to study with one another in a formal academic setting. Compared to getting everyone to pitch in cleaning the bathrooms, getting everyone to cooperate in a science project is probably a cinch. Classes are divided into small groups called han in which students are required to work together as a group in order to accomplish certain tasks and assignments. The han that serves lunch, practices basketball drills, and sweeps the hall together, discusses social studies issues, performs science experiments, and decorates the bulletin boards. Everybody is called upon to make a contribution somewhere in the list of activities, and everybody probably has to be less than the best some of the time.

One thing that is often commented upon by foreign observers of Japanese elementary schools is the general air of liveliness — or rowdiness — that characterizes the classroom environment. Japanese teachers devote far less time and effort to making children sit still and be quiet than do their counterparts in other countries. If talking to your neighbor is what you're supposed to be doing for most of the class period, and getting up to sharpen a pencil or adjust the curtains is not interpreted as disruptive, then discipline is less of a burden— and classrooms are noisier. Recesses and class breaks seem chaotic, which is okay with teachers, too.

These five themes, which I perceive as crucial to understanding elementary education in Japan, explain the variety of differences between the experiences of Japanese students and their international peers. In my view, these same points also account for the uncommon effectiveness of compulsory schooling in Japan.