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A Commitment to Children*

editor's introduction:

An Example of Teaching and Learning Outside of the United States. As a specific example of U.S. students' international performance, over many years and through many international comparisons, American students have been chronically outperformed by Japanese students. During the latter part of the 20th century, how Japan organized its schools and how its schooling took place therefore became of great interest to those in American education.

The present selection comes from a book that described the Japanese experience as of the late 1980s, continually contrasting it with American practices. The contrasts point to some misleading preconceptions Americans might have had about Japanese schooling. Among these might be the longstanding stereotype that Japanese students only behave in rigid and proscribed patterns and that they are not encouraged to pursue creative problem solving—which may at first appear to produce disorderly classrooms. The selection finds both creativity and orderliness in the Japanese schools.

The selection draws from one of the book's 10 chapters. It describes everyday life at the classroom level (again happening to be at the elementary school level), from the perspective of students, parents, and teachers, but also attending to the relationship between schooling and cultural conditions such as child-rearing practices and beliefs—an important dimension in any comparison to American education. The author personalizes the case study by focusing on illustrative but concrete daily interactions involving student, parent, and teacher. Within the selection also

*White, Merry. (1987). "Elementary Schools: Harmony and Cooperation." In *The Japanese Educational Challenge: A Commitment to Children* (pp. 110–133). New York: Free Press.

are embedded instances of individual Japanese students—a third-grader and a sixth-grader. Note how these vignettes come at the end of the selection, to illustrate the school life that has been the main case study. Unlike the attention given to individual teachers in the first two selections in this anthology, the two individual students are not themselves the main subjects of the case study.

Relevance of Case Studies: Recalling Earlier Educational Conditions. American interest in Japan's educational practices also appeared to have peaked during the 1980s and 1990s. Educators have now benefited from a broader appreciation of a diverse array of practices internationally, not just those coming from a single country like Japan. From this perspective, the value of case studies can be to capture historic and not just contemporary conditions, as in the first two selections.

The entire case study, again unlike the first two selections, also shows how case studies may be developed from a blend of experience and evidence, collected over a large number of years—and not necessarily based on a single, formal study. Instead, the author, formally trained in anthropology and sociology, notes that her book is based on “years of experience and observation in Japan,” including “observation, interview analysis, and vignettes of individual children at various grade levels.” You may have had a similarly extensive experience and therefore need not have to do a formal study in order to design your own case study.



Harmony and Cooperation

When Kenichi is about to become a first-grader, his parents, teachers, school administrators, and the community at large will mobilize themselves to make his entrance into the world of “real school” a most significant moment in his life. The preparation, the ceremony, and the carefully organized techniques for involving him in all the activity and its symbolism contribute to the importance of the day. When the day comes, administrators, teachers, staff, parents, and Kenichi himself will over and over again express commitment to the school, to his classmates, and to his own growth.

Once again Kenichi will become a blank slate, just as he was as he entered nursery school and kindergarten—a candidate for initiation into another group. The socialization at home and preschool give him only a limited kind of “credential” rather than a set of recognized skills that he can display as his personal property.

Preparations for Kenichi's adjustment to school begin early. Again, he and his mother are invited to attend an orientation day, and perhaps make another visit as the beginning of school approaches. While children who have had older siblings in the same school often have more confidence, all of

them approach the first day with a certain degree of anxiety. Mother has fussed over her son, bought new clothes (most public elementary schools do not have uniforms), equipped him with backpack and handkerchiefs, lunch-box and pencil case. Most schools will serve lunch, but some private schools and junior high schools rely on mothers to provide a well-balanced, aesthetic, and appealing lunch daily. (Teachers are known to send notes home to a mother whose lunch doesn't meet class standards.)

The first day parents and children arrive together at the school, which is usually within walking distance of the child's home, unless the child attends a private school and must be taken by bus or train. Parents and children, dressed to the hilt, converge on the schoolyard. Mothers wear their very best dresses, grandmothers come in kimonos, and fathers wear the dark suits, white shirts, and polished black shoes which they may otherwise wear only to weddings and important company functions. The boys are in new dark suits with short pants and caps, the girls in new suits or party dresses and hats.

The ceremonies begin, with the whole school assembled to welcome the first-graders. The sixth-graders, the most senior in the school, act as big brothers and sisters to the first-graders, many of whom seem bewildered by all the novelty and attention. The older children pin name cards, with class assignments, on each first-grader. The principal of the school then welcomes everyone back, and offers some exhortatory and uplifting remarks to the students, parents, and teachers. Because his remarks are simple and not overdone, the audience takes his precepts to heart; parents and teachers will repeat some of his phrases to children in the days to come. The principal finishes with introductions of teachers and staff—including kitchen crew and maintenance people—and with a plea for caution while walking to school in traffic. Indeed, safety is one of the key responsibilities of the school, since it is school that has brought the children so far from their homes and through such perilous passage. Some words from sixth grade class leaders follow, as does introduction of the Parent-Teacher Association. The total effect of everything is a welcome into a new family, much vaster than the intimacy of the mother-child relationship but still caring and concerned. The school is always called "our" school.

Sixth-graders then accompany first-graders to their classrooms, and parents disperse or wait outside. The first day for first-graders is short, again only a taste of what is to come. The teacher gives them a brief welcome in the classroom and introduces them to its features and geography. She tells them that they will be working hard this year, but that they will also have fun. They are asked to respond to a roll call, by standing next to their desks and saying loudly and briskly "Present!" After a brief presentation of routines, materials, and plans, the teacher dismisses the class and the children

wander back to their parents, who walk them home to change into play clothes and relax.

Detail and Process

When the year starts in earnest, the next day, the teacher does not wade directly into reading and computation or other academic subjects. She considers it far more important to socialize the children to the practices of group life and to the customs of this school.¹ She spends a very long time on such things as where one puts one's outdoor shoes, how one sits down and stands up, how one speaks in class, how one prepares one's desk for work (pencils at the top, notebook on the right, text on the left, etc.). As an American teacher knows, there are always some children for whom such things are difficult, and the girls tend to catch on early while some of the boys resist any routine.

One of the first lessons follows up on the first day's exhortation to speak up when roll is called. It is very important, children are told, to speak forthrightly and clearly in public, to project their voices and sound confident. The lesson here will stand them in good stead in school, work, and other situations to come.

This might seem paradoxical to a Westerner, who assumes that Japanese children are not encouraged to develop independent thought, speak their own minds, and project a strongly individualistic image to the world. Yet they are in fact, much more than our children, explicitly trained in public performance. This perhaps can be explained by separating *performance* as a skill, which anyone can learn, from responsibility for the content of one's own pronouncements. Once the distinction is made, the child is free to perform confidently since he is not usually displaying material of his own creation. So he isn't as vulnerable as a child who is asked to "state his mind." The quality of a Japanese child's performance is usually high but somewhat ritualized and predictable, thus perhaps minimizing risk to his ego. Later, of course, that same child does recite his own work, but by then he may well have justified confidence in his skill to perform.

Early on the similarly nonacademic lesson of self-reliance is also taught, which also may seem contrary to Western preconceptions of Japanese education. Self-reliance sounds to us like a big job for a first-grader, since it implies the prior development of a self with a set of independent motivations. We do of course push for independence among small children, but give them very little guidance about what this might mean and what they should do with it. So without clear domains for self-guided action, a Western child

can find himself at sea, and later may lose the capacity for a truly independent, “creative” task. Meanwhile, the Japanese child is taught to master certain small, discrete, carefully delineated tasks, one at a time, and is given a long time to learn them. The teacher ensures that the approach has been learned well before the child is encouraged to go on. When he is, the child is then fully expected to be able to do *those tasks* self-reliantly. The goal of Japanese self-reliance is, finally, a capacity for self-motivated effort.

Japanese teachers are a very patient lot. Lessons are repeated as often as is necessary, and always in step-by-step fashion. The child is not expected to grasp a method or principle thoroughly at first, and doesn’t feel any tension coming from high expectations. The teacher gives few overall explanations of the work at hand and many painstaking repetitions of small parts of the task or process. Moreover, verbal explanations are seen to get in the way of learning, though to an American teacher they may well come first. As a consequence of what is called “mastery learning,” Japanese children often come up with the conceptual point underlying a lesson before the teacher has provided it.

By and large, American teachers are impatient with teaching minute details, and may feel that more value of “prestige” comes from imparting an understanding of abstractions and an ability to verbalize the relationship between an abstract principle and the concrete instance at hand. Furthermore, American teachers often see any kind of emphasis on the rote learning of “unexplained” detail as leading a pupil to become too dependent on the instructor. In general, Westerners feel that *principles* set the child’s mind free, and want to release it for independent exploration as soon as possible. Japanese teachers, on the other hand, see pupil dependence as an important part of how one teaches, not in itself in any way infantilizing. And yet, as we shall soon see, “discovery learning” is also very significant in Japanese pedagogy.

Energy and Engagement

Because of our preconceptions of Japanese schooling, a walk into a typical fifth grade classroom in Japan may shock us. We might easily expect an environment suffused with rote learning and memorization, a structured and disciplined setting with an authoritarian teacher in control. This is far from the reality of most classrooms. Walking into a fifth grade math classroom, I was at first surprised: the mood was distinctly chaotic, with children calling out, moving spontaneously from their desks to huddled groups, chatting and gesticulating. An American teacher would wonder “Who’s in charge here?” and

would be surprised to see the teacher at the side of the room, calmly checking papers or talking with some students. When I came to understand what all this meant, I realized that the noise and seeming chaos was in fact devoted to the work of the class; children were shouting out ideas for possible answers, suggesting methods, exclaiming excitedly over a solution, and *not*, as we might suppose, gossiping, teasing each other, or planning something for recess or after school. The teacher was not at all upset as long as total engagement in the appointed set of tasks persisted; she actually felt that the noise level was a measure of her success in inspiring the children to focus and work.²

Later the teacher presented the children with a general statement about the concept of cubing. But before any formulas or drawings were displayed, the teacher asked the class to take out their math diaries and spend a few minutes writing down their feelings and sense of anticipation about the new idea. Now, it is hard to imagine an American teacher beginning a lesson with an exhortation to examine one's emotional predispositions about cubing.

After this, the teacher asked for any conjecture from the children about the process and for some ideas about how to proceed. The teacher then asked the class to form *han* (working groups) of four or five children each, and gave out materials to work on. One group decided to build a cardboard model of a cubic meter and took materials into the hall to do it. In a while they returned, groaning under the bulk of what they had wrought, and there were gasps and shrieks as their classmates reacted to the size of the model and some tried to guess how many of them might fit inside. The teacher then outlined for the whole class a very difficult cubing problem, well over their heads, and gave them the rest of the class time to work on it. The class ended without a solution, but the teacher made no particular effort to get or give an answer, although she exhorted them to be energetic. It was several days before they came up with the answer; there was no deadline, but the excitement did not flag.

Several characteristics of the class deserve highlighting. First, priority was given to feelings, predispositions, and opportunities for discovery rather than providing facts and getting to an answer fast. The teacher emphasized process, engagement, and commitment rather than discipline (in our sense) and outcome.

Second, assignments were made to groups. (This, of course, is true at the workplace as well.) Individual progress and achievement are closely monitored, but children are supported, praised, and allowed scope for trial and error within the group. A group is also competitively pitted against other groups; a group's success is each person's triumph, and vice versa. Groups are made up by the teacher and are designed to include a mix of skill levels. The teacher helps the *hancho* (leader of a *han*) to choreograph the group's

work, to encourage the slower members, and to act as a reporter to the class as a whole. The *hancho* is thus trained as an apprentice teacher as well, a job that falls to each child in turn.

Teacher and Students: Motivation and Management in the Classroom

The pedagogies of a Japanese elementary school are based on the idea that all children are equal in potential, and that the excitement of learning can best be produced in a unity of equals. Teachers, especially those strongly influenced by the Teachers' Union, try to enforce this conviction and see themselves as stalwart defenders of the ethic of cooperation against the pressure exerted by a need to compete. For teachers, competition creates division and pulls a child toward a negative individualism. So the teacher uses group activity of various kinds to stem what he sees as a baleful threat, centrifugal and divisive, and resists singling out individual pupils except for short periods of time and in turn. To put it another way, the Japanese teacher wants to create and maintain a *kyoshitsu okoku*, or "classroom kingdom," of equals. His nurturant care surrounds the entire class, and can be graphically represented (see Figure 3.1).

The need and desire for unity and harmony sometimes produces extreme strategems. In a school musicale, the recorders of children who don't play well are sealed with tape so that while these youngsters appear to be playing, no discordant sounds emerge to disrupt the smooth sound of class performance.³

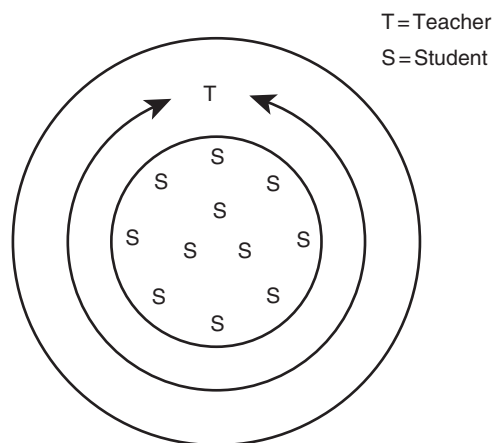


Figure 3.1

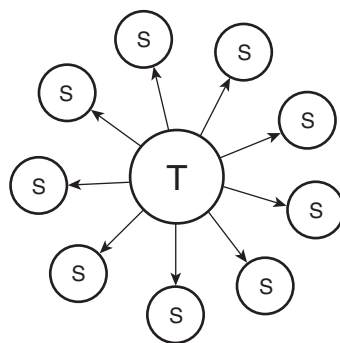


Figure 3.2

This sort of thing can be interpreted as unfortunate classroom public relations, but teachers feel that they are protecting the less able child from exposing inadequacy or “differentness.” In general, a Japanese teacher will go to great lengths to protect a child from something he can’t do very well.

A second model of classroom unity features a different view of the relationship of teacher to student. According to this model, the bonds which hold the group together are made up of the many dyadic relationships between the teacher and each student, as shown in Figure 3.2.

A more traditional model than the “classroom kingdom,” this second model is the one employed by religious orders, artistic and craft schools, and other corporate organizations such as the prewar *zaibatsu* (holding companies) and academic departments in universities. The teacher here is presumed to skillfully manage all the individual relationships, knowing each student’s strengths and weaknesses and attending to each individual’s development. Most important, as the teacher relates to each student, he continues to stress the harmony of the whole, and he ardently tries to eliminate any sense of competition or alienation. This is the “vertical equality” model; and the other, an “equality of peers.” Vertical equality is a way of teaching that demands much time and dedication. This means it is criticized by Teachers’ Union supporters, who feel that the long hours of counseling and home visits required produce exploitation.

Japanese educators say that there is no evidence that one or another model produces greater academic success in the examinations. But many still believe that motivation for true learning can occur only in the second model, which they say has become hard to maintain in large classes.

Teachers often describe their work by telling the story of the cormorants, long-necked black birds that can be trained to dive for fish. Traditional

cormorant fishermen owned flocks of such birds. Each bird was tied by a long cord held by the fisherman. If he had ten or fifteen birds, his handful of leashes would be hard to manage. While carefully keeping the leashes from tangling up, he had to handle each bird separately, even while minding the whole flock. This is the ideal classroom management mode: inducing harmony and paying close attention to the individual child.

The work team, or *han*, is used for both academic and nonacademic class purposes. It is, in fact, a part of pedagogical management, and its most common form is the *seikatsuhan*, or “daily life” *han*. For cleanup time, for lunch-serving time, for any other similar need, the unit of responsibility is the *han*. Teachers not only respect the didactic power of group learning, but also realize how appropriate it is for school activities of all kinds.

The *han* is also a teaching device used to engage children with diverse abilities in a single task. Though the group socializes children to see the value of cooperative teamwork, it also creates, teachers feel, an environment in which underachievers are stimulated to perform better, or at least feel fully included in what is going on. William Cummings talks about a socially backward boy put in a group with three “exceptionally tolerant” girls. They took him on as a “project,” and “when he would not stand up for a class presentation, they would push him up, and when he struggled with an answer they would supply him with tips.” Thus, Cummings says, “groups are conceived of as educational vehicles in the broadest sense rather than as mere instruments for rationalizing cognitive education.”⁴

Unlike the teamwork of the *han*, American peer tutoring provides instruction devoted to individual rather than group needs. Not a way to make sure that everyone belongs, it is instead a way to reduce the problems some children have with the teacher-student authority relationship, permitting a more relaxed form of instruction. Learning is definitely not regarded as a group goal, and the usual form of peer tutoring is one-on-one. Since the teacher’s authority carries no stigma and arouses no opposition in Japan, or rather, since authority per se engenders less anxiety than it does in the West, the Japanese seldom use it to motivate people. In the West, Esther Kohn says,⁵ students need to feel control, or to feel that power can be shared, in order to feel self-esteem. In Japan, sharing power evinces the attainment of cooperation, which, I will say again, is itself a source of personal well-being.

Similarly, good human relationships are seen by Japanese teachers not only as means by which children can be taught various academic subjects but also as ends in themselves. So teachers try to watch friendships developing between children, and act as counselors to those who might be having trouble socially. Teachers know that children need to be appreciated and valued by other children, and that slow learners especially need peers to cheer them

on. Friendships within the *han* are therefore regarded as developmentally important.

Most elementary school teachers say slow learners are few, especially in the early grades, but by the fourth grade there is more occasion to note problems. Here the “buddy system” of learning might be employed. Sometimes the parents of the faster learner will object, saying that to tutor another might slow down the learning of their own child. Teachers respond by asserting that not only is the role of the *oshiigo*, or “teaching child,” valuable for the learner, but the *oshiigo* himself learns better through teaching. In any case, the faster learner usually finishes the classwork before the slower and has time on his hands, since Japanese schools have no accelerated program of any kind.

Besides the *han*, teachers use various physical arrangements of the classroom to facilitate learning. For some classes the desks, which are never fixed to the floor, are arranged facing front: when an experiment is to be conducted on the teacher’s desk, slides are to be projected, or some other demonstration is to take place in the front of the room. At other times the desks may be arranged in groups of five or six, in the *hans* to which children have been assigned. For general class discussion, the teacher has the children move the desks into a U-shape, with the teacher’s desk at the open end. The class may thus have as many as three different shapes during the same day, and preparing his or her study plan, a teacher indicates what the physical arrangement of the desks will be at what time.

Teachers also explicitly employ motivation techniques. One such is the concept of *donyu*, or “introduction,” which means the initial moments of teaching a topic during which the children are “motivated to do the work actively.” Consider the *seikatsu-tsuzurikata*, or “life composition,” which has been around since well before World War II, especially in elementary schools. In a short essay, sometimes composed in a school diary, the child is encouraged to bring together what is learned in school with what is experienced in his life. The teacher often sets an example by relating a personal experience, and then gets the children to talk about it: “What would you have done if you had been me?”

A fourth grade art teacher once asked her class to paint a picture of “The Teacher’s Treasure.” She brought out her old, dirty, and much-used mountaineering boots and put them on her desk. At first the children couldn’t believe that these were a “treasure.” But the teacher told them stories of her college days when she would go to the mountains to hike, and regaled them with tales of her adventures with wild animals, of camping with friends, of the happiness she felt in the clean mountain air. The children were enraptured,

and while their paintings may not have been technically skilled, they had color and feeling: the boots had become real and important to them.

Some teachers are not so successful. Another fourth grade teacher tried to get her class to sing a fall song about red maple leaves. She brought some leaves mounted on a large sheet of white paper and asked her class to “describe how wonderful they are.” Dead silence followed, and then a few children, helping her out, tried to respond. Dead leaves, a dead exercise, and instead of motivation, only pity.

Fire and Air: A Science Class

A fifth-grader, of course, has to be motivated differently. Here a teacher may need only to be open to the children’s response. As we see fifth grade science students finding their places at the laboratory tables, the teacher, a man in his late forties dressed in a white lab coat, asks for their attention and then puts a question: “What do you think will happen when you put a bottle over a burning candle?” All hands go up, and he calls on five or six children, noting their responses but approving or disapproving none. He writes down all of the speculations on a blackboard, after which he sends the children to get bottles, candles, matches, and some water to extinguish flames. He asks paired sets of children to light the candle, to place the bottle upside-down over it, and to observe what happens. They do, and note that the candle goes out.

Most of the children aren’t content with that simple observation and introduce some variations, such as lifting the bottle a little, blowing under it, and so on. Others count the seconds it takes for the flame to die out. The teacher allows them to experiment, but keeps asking “Why did it go out?” The children all want him to visit their tables, to check the experiments they’ve devised, to answer questions. He answers no questions, except with more questions, or he asks that they try doing the exercise again. He insists that they all listen to each other’s observations and queries, and finally asks for several of the teams to present their own trials, and their hypotheses about the results to the class. In turn, each team goes to the front desk, sets up the equipment, and demonstrates what it did—some holding the bottle at different heights, others lowering the bottle suddenly. The teacher now asks what there is about the bottle, its position, the flame, the candle, or anything else affecting the circumstances that makes the flame go out sooner rather than later. Some children raise their hands, he calls on them, and they respond with a variety of answers. He then draws a diagrammatic representation

of the experiment on the board. Each team comes forward and provides explanations in firm, complete, and confident phrasing. The teacher also asks questions of those who haven't raised their hands, and some try to respond. But those who have nothing to say are in no way singled out and put on the spot.

The class then takes a ten-minute recess, since this is a double science session of two forty-minute periods. They then return noisily for the second session, which starts with a formal bow to the teacher. The ritual marks a clear break from the noise and a renewal of focus on the task of the day.

The children take up the question again, and this time the teacher asks if they know anything about oxygen, and the relationship between the flame and the air. The children answer somewhat tentatively, even though a few know a lot (most have only a sketchy acquaintance). The teacher surprises a daydreaming child by asking him a question in a rather peremptory tone. The child sits up suddenly, blushes, and has no answer. The teacher has been tough and sudden, and shocks everyone. He quickly resumes the friendly, Socratic tone established earlier.

For the last half-hour of the class, the children are asked to begin a report of the experiment. They take out paper, rulers, pencils, and start to draw the experiment and then to describe and explain it. After giving explicit instructions about how a proper laboratory report is prepared, the teacher moves around the room to advise and correct. The product is a lab report, half-finished today but to be completed at home. The children worked in pairs during most of the class, but the report is an individual assignment.

The teacher here demands a lot of his students but dictates very little. His lesson is the scientific method, and the experiment is a device by which method is taught rather than a conclusive demonstration of oxidation. Though this man is not one of the teachers in the school who "kid around" with the students, he is not known to intimidate. His method is exploration, but the limits are clear: children are not encouraged to go far beyond the constraints the materials themselves provide. And yet, the children are encouraged to push to the margin, to devise all the variations that their imaginations can bring to bear on the materials.

Thus, science in the Japanese elementary school is taught not through rote learning, but through direct experience, observation, and experiment. The curriculum is organized so that children's earliest experiences with science are gained through "friendly," everyday materials. In the first and second grades, children raise plants and observe the weather, and acquaint themselves with such basic principles as magnetism. They work through increasingly complex phenomena, principles, and contexts, so that by the sixth grade they are dealing with the basics of biology, physics, and chemistry.

The Value of Engaged Effort

Japanese elementary school pedagogy, like maternal socialization, is based on the belief that the teacher's job is to get all children to commit themselves wholeheartedly to hard work. In the United States, a teacher is expected to evaluate individual ability and to praise any level of accomplishment, even in the face of mistakes. In Japan, if the child gets 99 out of 100 right, the teacher will still say, "Not perfect, but it could be so if you *really* pay attention."

American educational rhetoric does invoke the idea of "the whole child," values "self-expression," and promotes emotional engagement in "discovery learning." But Japanese teaching style, at least in primary schools, employs all three in a mode that surpasses most American efforts. In the cubing class, I was struck by the spontaneity, excitement, and (to American eyes) unruly dedication of the children to the new idea. I was similarly impressed with the teacher's ability to create the mood. What's going on reflects cultural assumptions. American pedagogy usually separates cognition and emotional affect, and then devises artificial means for reintroducing "feeling" into abstract mastery. It is rather like the way canned fruit juices are produced—first denatured by the preserving process and then injected with vitamins to replace what was lost. The way Japanese culture works is more holistic.

As early as 1919, John Dewey also observed the absence of overt discipline in Japanese classrooms:

They have a great deal of freedom there, and instead of the children imitating and showing no individuality—which seems to be the proper thing to say—I never saw so much variety and so little similarity in drawings and other hand-work, to say nothing of its quality being much better than the average of ours. The children were under no visible discipline, but were good as well as happy; they paid no attention to visitors. . . . I expected to see them all rise and bow.⁶

The children in such a class *are* good as well as happy, since no one has taught them that any contradiction exists between the two. But it sometimes seems that American classrooms, and American parents as well, teach a different lesson: that goodness results from inhibition rather than joy, and that the demands on a child to be good cannot be consonant with whatever produces happiness. The kind of good-natured teasing and kidding, the uproarious noise that fills the Japanese classroom, the wrestling and hugging with the teacher after class, are clearly evidence of "happiness," but no one is "out of line." To be "in line" in an American classroom may mean no joy—the only source of which, sometimes, is behavior and forms of expression that are explicitly proscribed.

Social Lessons

The Japanese goals of the classroom engagement are early emotional maturity, compliance, and social courtesy, as well as engagement for its own sake. All this implies self-reliance, which seems to us inconsistent with compliant dependency. However, the “self” on which the child must learn to rely is in service to the social environment in which he must fit completely: thus, the child faces no real conflict.

For the Japanese child, social lessons are everywhere to be found, meaning that all activities during the school day are valued, not just those with explicit academic content. From the moment a child arrives until he leaves, every school-day performance and exchange is part of the learning experience. Earthquake drills are a good example.⁷ Out of the PA system comes a sudden rumbling noise, the noise of a simulated earthquake. Children reach for their padded hoods, made by their mothers on a pattern provided by the school, or for their hard hats, provided by the school, and huddle under their desks. Later a whistle blows an all-clear signal and the children line up in pairs to file out into the schoolyard. There, after roll call is taken, parents sometimes come to collect smaller children; mothers have been alerted ahead of time, their availability for such events being all but mandatory. In short, the school and family have worked together to ensure the security of the children. In the well-coordinated action taken by all to prepare for the drill, as well as from the drill itself, everyone learns an important lesson: for a vulnerable nation, cooperation is a matter of life or death.

Imagine This Fish in the Sea

The Japanese teacher, like his charges, is given limits to how much he can invent within the curriculum. Yet Japanese teachers push themselves to present the material imaginatively and, most of all, to emphasize common sense and the relevance of whatever is taught to the everyday lives of the students.

A fourth grade social studies teacher, for example, devised a way to study something required on pisciculture and the Japanese fishing industry. He began class by dumping the contents of a shopping bag on the front desk. In the bag were fish of all kinds and supermarket packets of shrimp and other shellfish. The desk was covered with limp and smelly things. The teacher then turned on a projector to show a chart on the wall, which was a diagrammatic representation of the Japanese coastline with indications of sea depth. He pointed out to the children where each of the fish on his desk might have been caught, at what depth they lived, and by what means fish

at different depths are caught. He showed them how far fishermen have to go to get different species, and what habits these fish have. As he talked, he constantly invited interruption and excitedly waved the fish in front of children's faces. This, of course, elicited cries of disgust, as some of the girls retreated under their desks.

The teacher was not told by the ministry of education's curriculum guidelines to provide examples of fish "in the flesh." Neither was he told to use the drama produced by a darkened room and projected images, nor to say anything about how fish are caught. By the end of the class, the children could recognize the fish and say something about their lives and habits, as well as the way fishermen go about making a living. And the smell of the fish would remain in the classroom for several hours, which could only remind the children of the lengths to which their teacher would go to help them understand.

This lesson in pisciculture is a good example of what Japanese teachers do to provide *sogo katsudo*, "integrated activities," for their classrooms. Elementary school teachers often put together interdisciplinary assaults on a theme. In the school where the abovementioned lesson took place, the social studies class considers the broad question of the importance of fish to Japanese life, the science class takes up the biology of fish, and the language class is devoted to writing stories about fish. For the third-grader in the same school, the theme is paper making. Children learn how paper is made, make their own, visit a paper factory, and in art class use paper in many ways as a medium. *Sogo katsudo* is an example of the freedom to innovate that can exist within a standardized Japanese curriculum.

Home and School

In home and school, learning reinforces human relationships and provides other emotional rewards. The lesson of supportive environments is that it is very important and entirely appropriate to be fully engaged in and excited by participation. Though Japanese children are thought to be obsessed by the prospect of exams that loom, in fact one finds little explicit stress on the distant future. Meanwhile, teachers spend time with the family of each of their charges, responsible for knowing the whole context of the child's life. While some teachers complain that mothers pressure children at home to study—"Don't play. Do your homework first!"—they genuinely feel that their own way of getting children involved works for any grade level or level of ability. Teachers suggest to mothers that they let the school handle the child's motivation.

Nevertheless, life at home mostly supports life at school constructively, except when it comes to handling examination anxiety. The examinations often involve parents in a child's education as early as elementary school. Parents can sometimes wield influence to get their offspring into the right middle schools, which are, of course, those with the best record of admission into the best high schools. And these are known by how many of their graduates enter the most prestigious colleges and universities.

But before exam anxieties begin in earnest, the mother as a member of the community comprising the school is very much caught up in her child's learning, and in most cases is as eager as the teacher to make the experience happy and relaxed, to engage rather than force or push the child. In that frame of mind, a mother will help her child with homework after school and in the evenings. This is usually regarded as positively integral to his education. The Japanese child needs maternal guidance and support, and the mother gets much satisfaction from helping him. But some teachers now say that they don't know who's being graded, the mother or the child.

Two Portraits

Two portraits, that of a third grade boy from a traditional shopkeeper's family and that of a sixth-grader already on a path to college, show us something about home and school during the elementary school years.

Jiro of the Bean Curd Shop. Jiro is an eight-year-old third-grader living in Osaka. He is the second son of a bean curd maker and his wife, who run a small shop in an older quarter of the city. Jiro's mother's father, a semi-invalid, lives with the family in their apartment behind the shop. The business consists of a front room facing the street—a room with cedar vats for soaking the soybeans, a motor-driven grinder, cauldrons to boil the beans, presses for making the tofu, and a small counter where customers are served. In a back room are sacks of beans and other supplies. The establishment is well known locally for its traditional bean curd; and even some suburban Osakans occasionally come here to buy. The shop has been in Jiro's family for four generations, ever since his great-great grandfather was adopted into the family as heir.

Jiro and his elder brother and younger sister have been raised among the sacks and in the steamy smells of tofu production. The older boy, now eleven years, will take over the shop upon his father's retirement and already works with him after school, waiting on customers during the late afternoon "housewives' rush hour." His mother keeps the books, cleans the shop

morning and evening, takes care of her father's needs, and chats with customers. The tofu making itself is Jiro's father's job, at least to supervise, but the moment of curd formation is considered a sacred time which mobilizes the whole household.

Jiro's job is to do well in school, because his future depends on his wits, not on inheritance. His parents hope he'll get a job in a large company and become an admired "salaryman." But they train him at home in the skills of a shopkeeper, just in case, and because shopkeeping is what they know. Jiro is very much encouraged to develop the skills of human relationships, for it is by maintaining warm ties with customers and neighbors that his parents feel the shop prospers. He is taught, at least by example, to remember everyone's name and their regular order; he also observes how his mother prepares gifts for people who have just moved into the neighborhood, as well as ceremonial gifts for old customers at holiday times. She always has hot water for tea ready whenever someone stops in. At slow times, she will make the rounds of the other neighborhood shops of various kinds, to cement relationships with the owners. In times of crisis, she must count on them.

Jiro also learns from his mother how to keep the books. She herself learned on the *soroban* (abacus), but recently the family has purchased a small personal computer. Jiro loves to use it, but his mother discourages him, saying that he must learn to do the accounting in the old way, or at least with paper and pencil.

Jiro's school is nearby, and he walks there every day with his brother. Jiro is in Mrs. Okayama's third grade. His favorite subject is art, and he sketches nearly all day in the margins of his workbooks and on scraps of paper. In art class he is consistently commended for his work, but is also consistently reminded that he has a lot to learn. He is often chided for scribbling in his books. When the teacher assigned a project to the class in two-person teams, he and his friend composed and crafted a book of poems and sketches. The teacher was amazed at their skills and had the boys present it to the school. When Jiro and his friend took the project to the principal's office for the presentation, Jiro was nervous but proud. No one before in the class had ever been honored in this way. Jiro's mother and father were proud too, but quietly hoped the school would not encourage Jiro to become an artist: too risky a future.

Mrs. Okayama devotes the most class time to Japanese language, averaging one hour or more per day. The children are learning characters, and by the end of the third grade they will know about four hundred. But this is still not enough to read a newspaper, which requires about nineteen hundred. The books they read use characters plus *furigana*, or syllabic transliterations for characters they don't yet know.

Next to Japanese, the subject most emphasized is arithmetic, with four sessions per week and regular homework. Science and social studies follow, then music and art. (Physical education is given as much time as science and social studies.) The social studies curriculum covers a wide range of topics in an exploratory, interdisciplinary way. Children in the first grade usually start with an investigation of the local neighborhood and work out to their city, their prefecture, and their region. As the pupils grow older, social studies encompasses even larger geographical units, and moves back in time as well.

Neither Jiro nor his brother attend *juku*. They both get good grades in school, and for now their parents are satisfied, but there is talk of sending Jiro's brother to *juku* when he gets to junior high school. For even if he will eventually inherit the shop, the parents hope he can go to a good high school, which confers prestige on the family. It is Jiro whom they hope to send to college, so that he can enter a company, and he, too, will start *juku* in junior high school. His days, for now, are pleasant and unpressured, and he and his friends play after school before doing the evening's homework.

Tomoko at the Brink. Now let's look at a sixth grade girl, nearing the end of her elementary school career, as she looks forward to entering middle school. Five and a half years have passed since she was a timid first-grader, awed and excited by a new world. She is now a confident and accomplished student, seeing the school as a "family" that she is rather hesitant to leave.

To begin the second term of the sixth grade, Tomoko has returned to school after summer vacation. During that time, she, like nearly all her classmates, worked hard to maintain and advance her skills by taking classes in tutoring school and by reading and studying at home. Her class, along with all her teachers, also took a trip together to a hot-spring resort near the sea, and this was the high point of her summer. Her family took a one-week vacation to visit her uncle and his family on his tangerine farm in Shizuoka prefecture. Upon returning to school, she brought her summer notebooks, her summer science project (an insect collection), and an essay she wrote about the class trip.

Tomoko has been with her group of classmates for five and a half years—indeed with some since kindergarten. She knows them well, and although her friendships wax and wane in intensity and she seems to have a different "best friend" every year, they are still all her friends, and that sense of family was further enhanced during the class summer excursion.

Tomoko lives with her family, including her younger brother (a second-grader at the same school), in a condominium near the school. Her father, an executive in a general trading company, has spent much of the past eighteen months overseas, first in Oslo and then in Saudi Arabia. He was earlier

asked by his company to help set up an office in Europe for two years, but he and his wife felt that the risks of taking their children out of Japanese schools outweighed the potential benefits (extra pay, for one). He declined (with some risk of losing promotional ground) and accepted instead a somewhat less prestigious “roving” position, which would allow him to return to Japan frequently. He says that if an overseas posting had been proposed when the children were very small he might have taken it, for he hopes that they can be more “international” in outlook. At this stage, however, he feels that Tomoko, especially, ought to stay in a Japanese school to ensure that she will be able to go to a good high school and university. Although he does not want to intensify prematurely the anxiety of the examinations to come, he feels that a long-range perspective on the children’s future, which accounts for pressures on the horizon, is necessary. So, for the time being, Tomoko’s mother is in sole charge of the household, and although the grandmother lives nearby and can help out occasionally, the children’s educational lives are the mother’s responsibility. Tomoko hopes that her father will be home for her sixth grade graduation in March.

The second term begins in the first week of September. The first day starts with a school assembly in the schoolyard, less formal than the opening of the year in April, but with a special message to sixth-graders from the principal. He reminds them that because this is their last term in the school, they must apply themselves to their work and to their friendships to make the year a meaningful and productive one.

Early in the morning, Tomoko and her friends choose to meet at a corner a few blocks from school, to enjoy a walk together. The younger children also meet at set locations in each neighborhood for the same purpose. Even getting to school is hence a lesson in community. Not to join *some* group on the way to school is a bit antisocial, or means that one arrives too early or too late, neither of which is good.

Tomoko’s schedule is a busy one. She has classes in Japanese language (five classroom sessions per week), in social studies (three per week), in math, science, domestic science, sports, and music. She also works on the yearbook committee, and will have to help to prepare the copy for the book in only a few weeks. She has been chosen *toban* for about a month and feels both proud and nervous about the responsibility.

The *toban* is the leader of the class. The method of selection and the length of the term vary greatly from school to school. The children chosen to be *toban* and other class officers are often given preferment by virtue of their academic ranking, meaning that social responsibility and personal success are strongly connected. In some schools, the term is short and many children are given an opportunity to serve. Tomoko must meet with the

teacher regularly to talk about matters that come up in class discussions, and issues perceived to be problems by students and the teacher. The *toban* also helps organize class outings, skits, and other events.

Last term there was a significant problem in a class that the *toban* had to help monitor. One boy had teased another child, whose mother is Korean, and the hazing had taken on a racial cast. The teacher had overheard remarks at recess in the schoolyard, and had brought the two children together to talk about it. It turned out, according to the weeping victim, that this was not the first time a child had “called him names”; accordingly, the teacher decided that a class discussion was needed.

Since there was then (and is now) in the press much coverage of *ijime*, or “bullying,” the parents and teachers of the school were especially on the alert to any incident that might fall in the category. Their school had been free of such incidents up to then, and they wanted to nip this one in the bud.

There was an open-ended discussion in class, during which children presented their views of the situation and a heated debate developed about when children should solve their own problems and when they should be brought to adult attention. Some resolution was achieved. The children were asked to imagine how the victim felt, and to put themselves in his place, feeling his pain and his anger. They were asked to judge whether there had been any provocation, and whether the children who were teasing had any other reason to be acting out their feelings in this way. Only once were the perpetrators singled out, and they expressed sorrow at having teased the victim. Finally, the teacher asked the class to remember the importance of the sixth grade in the school; younger children look up to them for guidance and for examples of good behavior. The teacher and students together expressed a hope that such episodes would not blemish their own and the school’s record again. Tomoko hopes that she will not have to help adjudicate such a crisis in her term as *toban*.

Tomoko’s daily job at the start of the term is to help sweep the halls of the sixth grade’s corridor. Children are responsible for cleaning the school. Not having maintenance crews, Japanese schools rely on the children to tend the rooms and halls; outside tradesmen arrive only for major cleaning and repairs. At some schools, the work is done in the early morning; at others, during the last period of the day. Children wear smocks and dust scarves over their hair; they sweep, dust the desks and other surfaces, and wet-mop the floors of halls and classrooms.

Children also serve lunch. Most schools do not have cafeterias, since space is at a premium, and lunch is eaten in the classroom. The hot lunch is picked up by a team of children, while the rest arrange the desks to form group “tables.” The servers wear white smocks and usually caps and face

masks. Lunch is usually not what we would consider “traditional Japanese” fare, but is usually bread, a main dish with some sort of meat, and a vegetable, along with milk. A typical meal at Tomoko’s school: bread, margarine and marmalade; chop suey with pork and vegetables; a boiled egg and milk. Rice is almost never served, to the consternation of domestic rice growers; but since most of Japan’s rice is now imported, it is no longer a local industry. Another group of chores gives children a sense of the importance of nature in their lives: children are responsible for caring for the school’s animals and the garden that they have planted. Usually these tasks are taken care of in the early morning.

At recess, which is really an exercise break, children go out in all kinds of weather to perform calisthenics, led by teachers. Many teachers regularly wear exercise clothes and warm-up suits to school, so it is hard to tell who is the physical education teacher and who the science teacher.

Outside of school, Tomoko has several activities. Classes finish at 2:30, and on some days Tomoko stays later for extracurricular pursuits. On others she arrives home at 2:45, on Tuesdays and Thursdays leaving after a snack for her *juku* class—afternoon sessions at a small neighborhood tutoring school where she does extra work in math and has also begun to study English, a subject that she will formally begin in middle school next year. She is interested in having a job which will allow her to travel, and daydreams about being a stewardess or tour guide, or in grander reveries, about working for the United Nations.

Tomoko’s *juku* class meets from 3:30 to 5:00, once a week in math and once in English. The tutoring school is not high-pressured like those attended by some of her classmates, especially the boys, but is aimed at “enhancing” the work she does in school. The English class, she says, is fun, and she enjoys using the language tapes. This year’s “best friend” is taking the English class with her, and they take the bus home together, practicing their English noisily and falling into giggles as they imitate the accent of their instructor.

After the Saturday morning session at regular school, the weekend begins for Tomoko. She has gymnastics lessons during the afternoon, at a special gymnasium on the other side of the city, founded by a former Olympic gymnast, a Mrs. Ikeda. This class is very demanding, and the teachers have high expectations for the girls. Tomoko feels very anxious as the time for the spring gymnastics meet approaches, and she often cannot eat or sleep just before it. She once broke a toe in an event, but the tension before and embarrassment after the accident far exceeded the physical pain. The tone and feeling of the school is very similar to that of the fast-track *juku* that prepare children for the exams to the best high schools and universities, and the

message is the same: doing your best is not enough, but with effort and the right attitude, one can exceed all standards.

Although Tomoko's evenings are spent studying, she watches an hour or so of television—usually one of the pop song shows featuring stars who are not much older than she. Her Sunday recreation time may be spent with her family, because it is her father's day off too, or she may go shopping with her friends, looking for records, clothes, and the latest "paraphernalia" for schoolgirls presented by the large department stores in a special section—keychains, school bag "mascots," handkerchiefs, decorated pencil cases, anything at all with a Snoopy motif or the latest cartoon character.⁸

Tomoko is not especially interested in boys. While her American counterparts might be dressing up, trying on some makeup, even in extreme cases participating in sexual encounters, Tomoko and her friends see boys as classmates, sometimes as pals, and sometimes as nuisances. In American terms we might say that Japanese children have a delayed adolescence, or—possibly—none at all. High schoolers, as Thomas Rohlen points out, are called "children" (*kodomo*), and although there are words in Japanese for "youths," people in their teens, if they are still in school, are not "dignified" by such a term, nor set apart as "teenagers."⁹

Tomoko's last term in elementary school will most likely be a positive and happy experience, full of real cheer. She is headed for a nearby middle school, not an elite or prestigious one, but one where her parents feel she will receive what she needs to get into a good high school, since she herself seems highly motivated in her studies. Tomoko has never discussed where she will go beyond middle school but assumes she'll attend a good high school and college.

Tomoko's parents have not pushed her. Her attendance at the *juku*, at least in the math class, was generated not out of anxiety that she might fall behind, but because her teacher at school said she might be understimulated in the sixth-grade curriculum. Anyway, her friends were all taking extra classes. There are examples in her class at school of children who *are* experiencing more school-related tension. Tetsuo, a boy who has strong interests in science, takes *juku* classes every afternoon, for his parents expect that he may have a chance at entering a national university, and think perhaps Tsukuba, a science-oriented university, would be appropriate. Tetsuo will attempt to enter a middle school out of the neighborhood, whose entrance rate into the best local high school is known to be high. It is fair to say that parents tend to focus more on boys' "talents" in school and to attempt to provide them with the best environment. While the educational future of girls is of course attended to, and admission into a good school is of great importance, the ladders are different, and ultimately, the investment in first-rate education not seen as important for girls.

Secondary school represents a major departure from the modes and content of learning experienced in elementary school. Tomoko and her friends are aware that they are about to leave a place and period in their lives where harmony and warmth are of primary significance and where cooperation is more highly valued than competition. The next three years in middle school, and the following three in high school, loom as periods of serious effort and testing, characterized at best as challenging, and at worst as a devastatingly harsh environment in which one's future becomes mapped.

Notes

1. Lois Taniuchi Peak, "The Psychological Transition from Home to School," unpublished paper, Harvard Graduate School of Education, 1982.

2. The similarity between this kind of classroom and a typical office is striking. Such an office is a large open room with many desks facing one another in rows, allowing everyone to be part of an active, usually fairly noisy environment. As in the classroom, productivity and "health" are measured by the visible and audible evidence of engagement.

3. Another example illustrates school, rather than class, uniformity. On the day when national achievement tests were given, a school requested that those children who were near failure stay home and not take the test, so that the school's record would not be blemished.

4. Cummings, *Education and Equality in Japan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980), 127.

5. Esther Kohn, "Beyond the Self: Group Learning in Japan," unpublished manuscript, Harvard Graduate School of Education, spring 1985.

6. Letter from John Dewey, cited in Victor N. Kobayashi, *John Dewey in Japanese Educational Thought* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1964), 28.

7. Gary Swartz, "Wilf's School," *PHP* (Aug. 1984): 30-38.

8. It is interesting to consider the differences in audiences for these goods in Japan and the United States. Originating in Japan, under such labels as Hello Kitty, and Patty and Jimmy, these items were seen as excellent exports to the American market. In Japan they sell to girls from ten to twenty years of age, and in fact, to girls of almost any age before marriage. When performing a market analysis of the appropriate American audience for these "cute" things, the American researchers advised companies that the appropriate age group in America was girls aged four to seven. I am grateful to Liza Carihfield Dalby for this comment.

9. Rohlen, *Japan's High Schools* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1983), 196.