

Educational Leadership

April 2007 | Volume 64 | Number 7

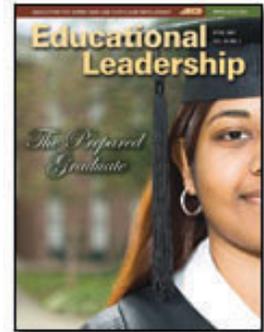
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Educating the Heart

Japanese students are learning that virtue and morally sound decision making are the bedrocks of a democratic society.

Sherry Schwartz

In fall 2006, the Japan Society of New York sponsored a trip to Japan for teacher educators. As part of that group, I had the opportunity to learn about the Japanese education system. We spoke with administrators, college educators, teacher candidates, principals, teachers, and students. We visited 11 schools in different areas of the country. We observed in classrooms, shared meals, and—through our translators—had multiple opportunities to ask questions and converse.



April 2007

More than Academics

As capitalist societies, both the United States and Japan place a high value on economic success. Both countries emphasize academic performance, as measured by standardized exams and high grades, as a ticket to success. Japanese students spend more time in school than U.S. students do, but they spend a surprising amount of that time on *Kokoro-no-kyoiku*—education of the heart.

Japanese educators include moral growth as an integral part of one's intellectual growth. Elementary and junior high schools in Japan have a formal, nationally mandated moral curriculum. Japanese high school students develop responsibility and hone their decision-making skills more informally, through participation in clubs, trips, and community projects. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe recently supported a bill that calls for

cultivating an attitude that respects tradition and culture, loves the nation and homeland that have fostered them, while respecting other countries and contributing to international peace and development. (Ito, 2006)

A good civic education can accomplish these goals because it helps students develop and evaluate personal attitudes and choices as well as respect the beliefs of others, even those who hold a different worldview.

Promoting Virtues and Values

The habit of ethical behavior informs a person's conduct and character. Plato believed that only a virtuous person can enjoy the "good life" of fulfilling personal potential. Aristotle noted four important virtues that he believed were the foundation of good behavior: fortitude, the courage to carry out good decisions; prudence, the wisdom to think through good decisions; justice, a

sense of fairness and honesty; and temperance or self-discipline (Duplass, 2004). Moral education in Japan promotes generosity, compassion, love, justice, self-discipline, respect for life, and respect for one another.

Moral education focuses not only on helping Japanese students understand the role of personal virtue in decision making, but also on understanding societal values. Japanese society places great importance on the following values:

- *Equality*. Japanese educators implement equality through a standardized curriculum, centralized selection of textbooks, and equalized per-pupil expenditures.
- *Effort*. Japanese parents and schools believe that all students can and will succeed if they just work hard enough. Effort and diligence are highly valued (Kira, 1998, 2002).
- *Trusting relationships*. Public school teachers in Japan earn high societal respect and relatively high salaries, but they also work 12-hour days. More than just academicians, Japanese teachers serve as role models and guidance counselors for their students; they communicate with students and families inside and outside school. To help maintain these trusting relationships, teachers often “loop” with students for their junior and senior high school years.
- *Harmony*. Japanese schools value community, harmony, and cooperation as part of their daily activities (Kira, 1998). All students take time from their school day to set up and serve lunch, clean their school building, and maintain the grounds.

As the world shrinks and becomes more interconnected and as cultures become more diversified, understanding the values of cultures other than one's own becomes crucial to solving problems and achieving consensus (Schwartz, 2006). One way that Japanese students learn to understand and respect other cultures is by studying English, starting in elementary school. Coteachers in their language classrooms come from English-speaking countries around the world.

The Challenges of Moral Education

America's founders believed that learning to be virtuous citizens, developing democratic values, and doing the “right thing” were important elements of a democracy. James Madison thought that without virtuous people, no amount of law or government power could protect citizens from one another.

With those beliefs in mind, the first public schools in the United States took on the job of instructing citizens in virtuous behavior. As early as 1789, the Massachusetts School Law insisted that teachers teach virtues that promoted universally good behavior, such as

piety, justice, regard for truth, love of country, humanity and universal benevolence [because] virtues [are] the ornaments of human society and the basis upon which the republican constitution is structured. (Paris, 1995, p. 64)

However, two major shifts occurred to alter the original vision of civic and moral education in the United States. First, from the late 19th century on, school curriculum has increasingly focused on academics rather than on morality. It's clearly easier to come to a consensus on academic—rather than moral—

issues. State and national academic standards as well as No Child Left Behind underscore the emphasis on academics and knowledge acquisition in the classroom.

Second, as the United States becomes increasingly culturally diverse, it is becoming harder to find common ground (Schwartz, 2006). How can a local school district determine community morality? Moreover, some people question whether schools should wield moral authority at all, believing that moral education belongs in the home.

Nevertheless, many U.S. educators still rank the study of virtues and values as vital to the development of democratic beliefs. The big questions are where and how to put those concepts into the school curriculum.

Just as pluralistic societies have their own set of challenges in defining a common moral focus, so do homogeneous societies like Japan. For instance, the recent adoption in Japan of a high school history textbook has drawn public criticism—both inside and outside the country—for its omission of such Japanese wartime atrocities as the 1937 Nanjing Massacre, in which an estimated 300,000 Chinese civilians died (Zhao & Hoge, 2006).

Education of the Heart

The gemstone of Japan's effort to develop thoughtful and conscientious citizens is its formal moral curriculum, which is implemented monthly in all elementary (grades 1–6) and junior high schools (grades 7–9). Established by the Ministry of Education, the moral curriculum requires 34 hours of instruction in 1st grade and 35 hours in each subsequent grade. Individual schools can select from a range of topics and pedagogical strategies.

For example, the moral curriculum for 1st graders at the rural Nakanokami Elementary School in Kainan City includes speaking with a cheerful voice; learning the importance of decision making; saying *thank you*; being cheerful, cooperative, and kind; and trying hard in work and school. The school song promotes these qualities, by emphasizing “getting along” and “making a happy and bright society.” Students also draw and display pictures of characters with positive attributes that they come across in their reading. Such attributes become a topic of discussion in class.

By 6th grade, teachers reinforce moral themes in a more sophisticated manner. Students learn to appreciate and express kindness, to have a “strong” heart, to develop a sense of self, and to welcome and understand different perspectives. They also learn to act responsively with deep feelings for others, strive for peace and international understanding, and recognize the importance of preserving and maintaining the earth.

Students learn early on that they share this planet with others. Everyone pitches in to ensure that the schools are clean and in order, and all parks and shrines are beautifully maintained. Students learn about the earth's fragility and the need to prevent the destruction caused by nuclear weapons and war.

Japanese children practice these virtuous behaviors inside and outside the classroom. For example, students spend approximately one hour each day cleaning their schools and school grounds. They change their clothes and put on work uniforms to do this. I also saw assigned

students assemble to serve lunch to their teachers and peers. Selected servers washed their hands, donned masks and gloves, and served their fellow students from large vats that they carried into the classroom under the watchful eyes of their teachers. Students served others before serving themselves.

Aside from cleaning and food-serving chores, students must actively participate in a school club. Students take enormous pride in their clubs and are serious about them. Each club meets every day after school for several hours as well as on Saturdays. Club members run the show entirely. At Yokohama Hiranuma Senior High School near Tokyo, for example, teachers became part of the audience as Japanese students organized, explained, and demonstrated the ancient ritual of serving tea.

Class trips to various cultural and historical spots are another frequent extracurricular activity in Japanese schools. High school students—not the teachers—plan every aspect of these events. Students also plan the yearly cultural festivals and sports days advocated by the Educational Ministry.

Some U.S. educators may believe that so many hands-on experiences, which take up several hours of each school day, might detract from the academic agenda. However, these experiences help students interpret moral virtues in a social context.

Japan emphasizes the connection between the moral and political contexts in its emphasis on peace education. The curriculum addresses peace themes through mandated classes scheduled two times each week in junior and senior high schools. Students discuss the peace process as it surfaces in literature and current events.

Another important emphasis on international peace is a trip that *every* Japanese child takes—to the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum. The main theme of the museum is “The Spirit of Hiroshima”:

the constant and unwavering desire for the abolition of nuclear weapons and a world permanently at peace . . . We must reflect critically . . . not just on the A-bomb but on war and the actions that led to war. (Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, 2004, p. 26)

The museum displays sobering exhibitions of artifacts, photographs, and eyewitness accounts of the devastation. In 1995, the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki launched a traveling exhibition in the hope of arousing international sentiment toward nuclear weapons abolition. The exhibit visits schools and travels inside Japan as well as internationally.

Current violence around the globe as well as isolated incidents of violence and bullying in some Japanese schools has motivated the Japanese Ministry of Education to think even more critically about the importance of strengthening the moral and peace curriculum. The Ministry hopes that this approach will improve the moral climate and that, by doing so, the country can set a better example for democracies the world over.

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