

Japan: The Learning Society

Japan's achievements are the results of an outstanding education system that emphasizes quality of instruction, gives priority to children's learning, and rewards hard work.

Japan has been called "a nation of 115 million overachievers" (Forbis, 1976), a description that captures an essence of our close ally that is comparatively little known in the United States. The Japanese, who are also overly modest and discrete, rank first among nations in several areas: the number of inventions and patents granted each year; the number of novels published per year; high school completion rate; mastery of foreign languages by high school and college students; test scores in mathematics and science among school children (in contrast to the U.S., which ranks 15th); rate of real economic growth and productivity increase; and the quality of goods and services in such industries as transportation, communication, consumer products, and electronics (Seward, 1977; Vogel, 1978).

In the post-industrial, global society in which information is more than ever the primary source of economic development and cultural influence, Tokyo is likely to become the world center (Torrence, 1980).

Leaping from peasant to modern society in a century (a task that took Western civilization several hundred years), recovering from the devastation of World War II in only a few decades, and surpassing all but the U.S. in national income cannot be attributed to innate ability, cultural mystique, or natural resources. Rather, the key to Japan's success seems to be a steady, large educational investment in human resources, a policy that Schultz (1981) has shown pays the highest dividends to the individual and to the society in the long run.

Diane Profita Schiller is Assistant Professor, Curriculum and Instruction, Loyola University, Chicago, Illinois; and Herbert J. Walberg is Professor of Human Development and Learning, College of Education, University of Illinois, Chicago.

DIANE PROFITA SCHILLER
AND
HERBERT J. WALBERG

Much could be said about Japanese education; but here we will confine ourselves to an examination of several productive factors in school learning that we are studying in American and Japanese classrooms in collaboration with Professor Hiroshi Azuma of the University of Tokyo and other Japanese researchers under the joint sponsorship of the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science and the U.S. National Science Foundation. The seven factors are age or developmental level, ability, quantity of instruction, quality of instruction, motivation, home learning environment, and classroom social environment (Walberg, 1981).

Ability and Developmental Level

Free, public education in Japan extends from grade one through grade nine, but sentiment is rising to lower the compulsory school age to four. A survey conducted by the Japanese Language Research Center indicated four-year-olds are psychologically ready to learn to read and write (Anderson, 1975). Torrence (1980) pointed out that the physical skills, visual arts productions, creative dramatics, music performances, and self-management skills of Japanese children of this age are far superior to any he had ever encountered and beyond what he thought was developmentally possible. He also placed in this category the creative expression and problem-solving skills displayed by young Japanese children.

The Japanese view ability as a highly alterable variable. Disciplined study is

far more important than innate ability. Japanese educational practice is very close to the idea of mastery learning, a demonstrably effective teaching strategy (Walberg and others, 1979). Japanese educators concentrate on such alterable variables in the learning environment as cues, participation, reinforcement, and feedback to promote mastery. Analyses carried out in the International Study of Educational Achievement reveal high average levels of cognitive achievement among Japanese school children compared to others, smaller variation in their scores, and a high level of motivation for further learning.

Motivation

In reviewing research on motivation carried out in many nations, Uguroglu and others (1980) conclude that persistence is a key to effective motivation. Traditionally, the Japanese view success not as a matter of luck but of disciplined, enduring effort. Japanese students take the long view, believing that intense devotion and continued practice over many years will ensure their success. They realize that some things may have to be foregone and that short-cuts are harmful. The highest point, *satori* or sudden flash of enlightenment, can only come after long, intensive study. The Japanese culture and media also encourage motivation and disciplined, competitive effort. Japanese newspapers offer awards for creative writing, science, art, music, and English speech.

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Home Learning Environment

The Japanese save approximately 30 percent of their disposable income, in contrast to Americans who save about 6 percent. Parents spend much of their savings on private tutors (Vogel, 1978) and special schools to help their children prepare for entrance examinations. The family is prepared to make great financial sacrifices should their child be accepted at an elite secondary school or famous university.

Family life is arranged to ensure proper study. Children are often excused from family responsibilities during their exam preparation. Parents take an active part in school affairs and are good models. The majority continue to read books and master new bodies of knowledge.

Quantity of Instruction

Japanese students attend school five days per week from 8:30 to 3:15 and on Saturdays until noon. Junior high students spend on average about ten hours per week on homework. Students also typically spend two to three hours per week in after school club activities and often attend special tutoring schools for up to seven hours per week. While the minimum number of school days is 210, most schools are in session from 240–250 days, in contrast to about 180 days in the U.S.

Quantity of instruction can also be described on a more micro level, classroom instructional time. Japanese teachers attempt to maximize student concentration during school hours. The children seem to be constructively engaged in their lessons about 85 percent of the time, whereas American students are engaged as little as 25 percent of the time (Walberg and Frederick, 1982).

Quality of Instruction

Probably the most important aspect of the curriculum in Japan is the Course of Study, a curriculum guideline produced by the Ministry of Education and used throughout the 48 prefectures. The Course of Study is very detailed and, while there is some flexibility allowed for teaching methods, teachers are not encouraged to modify it. The Course of Study is used extensively at the university in teacher preparation courses and as a part of the qualifying exam in each prefecture. While teachers are certified by the prefectures, they are closely monitored by the Ministry of Education, which finances a 7–10 day training period in each prefecture for new teachers.

In addition to informal after-school study meetings, 7–10 day sessions are required for teachers every five years or after promotion to fulfill the need for continuous training. The Course of Study is updated every ten years and three rounds of meetings at different levels acquaint all school personnel with changes in the curriculum.

Skill training is an essential component in Japanese education. By the sixth grade, nearly all students can play at least two musical instruments; public speaking training begins in the second grade; and most students can swim. Seventy percent of the elementary schools have swimming pools, and elementary school teachers must be able to swim to be certified.

The Japanese value right living, sensibility, and judgment. Grades one through nine have a weekly class period devoted to morals; topics include sportsmanship, courtesy, economy, the importance of study, and the existence of different points of view. Students eat lunch in the classroom with their teacher in order to develop proper habits. Students take turns serving each other, donning white hats and masks. When all have been served, the students say a few words of gratitude for the food; the meal ends with praise for the cook.

Students learn organizational skills in carrying out most of the housekeeping tasks in the school. Student government begins in the fourth grade, and children organize assemblies, field days, and class excursions in addition to classroom duties.

Textbook prices are held low and children keep their books. Four to five texts are approved for each grade/subject area and adoption is a local district decision.

Classroom Social Environment

The group identity is a strong cultural value in Japan. Students talk about improving their performance in group sessions of self-reflection. Self-discipline is taught through stories of great men and women and in discussing classroom procedures for the group.

Expected standards of behavior are clear and a part of school lessons. Punishment is handled with expressions of disapproval or disappointment. More serious matters are handled by a call or visit to the family.

The teacher is viewed as an ally in assisting students and is available outside classroom hours and during the summer. Teachers feel responsible for student motivation; the notion of mentor

is a tradition in Japan. The mentor not only teaches but offers guidance and career counseling. The tradition of master artisans pervades the classroom; Japan honors selected men and women as Living National Treasures.

Conclusion

Americans know too little of Japan, the Japanese, and in particular their educational system, one that in many respects deserves study and possible experimental adoption in our own and in other nations. Although nearly all Japanese school children learn to read English, and a few learn one or two other languages as well, very few foreigners have learned the Japanese language, a great handicap to the rest of the world. But mastery of their language is unnecessary to know that their steady and large educational, family, and personal investments in education have brought them great dividends in national and individual accomplishment that enrich the rest of the world. ■

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