

Education in Japan: Surprising Lessons

Japan's economic success is shaped largely by its geography, culture, and society; we cannot expect to achieve economic growth by copying Japanese education.

Those of us charged with the care of America's public schools have recently been urged to learn some lessons from the Japanese. These exhortations come not only from prestigious sources (the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, for example), but from more popular voices as well. Television commentators, newspaper columnists, and friends down the block ask us why the Japanese seem to run better schools than we do.

This interest in Japan stems almost entirely, I think, from the American fear that we are slipping out of the front ranks of world economic powers and losing our competitive edge to other nations. Japan has moved to the head of the line, thereby posing not only an economic challenge but a model to be examined and imitated.

Americans don't know much about Japanese schools. We assume, however, that they must be playing a vital role in Japan's economic triumphs in electronics and automobile design and production. Reports that Japanese students do well on international mathematics tests are linked to these successes and provoke the growing insistence in this country that we should teach more math and science.

The media also like to emphasize the dedication, discipline, and studiousness of Japanese students. This image may be even more appealing to Americans, who annually rank the decay of school order and discipline as their greatest educational concern.

Whatever their source, these assumptions and images pose a challenge that educators in this country can't ignore. A group of colleagues and I were recently able to probe them in detail, primarily through discussions with Japanese educators and corporate executives and in visits to elementary and secondary schools throughout Japan.

What we learned was illuminating and surprising. Our major conclusion is that any attempt to replicate aspects of Japanese schooling in the United States without a thorough understanding of Japanese culture and society would be unwise and probably wrong. Cultural values and social forms and conditions shape the schools of any nation; nowhere is that instantly clearer than in Japan.

Culture and Society

Many of Japan's cultural and social features may be the result of its geog-

raphy. Japan is a group of islands with a land mass the size of Montana. Its 115 million people live on 20 percent of this land; the rest is mountain. The people and their homes, gardens, farms, temples, businesses, and industries must be intricately fitted into the available space. For a thousand years the Japanese have been practicing the construction of miniature worlds, a talent and inclination obvious in their art and industry, especially their intricately designed small cars and electronic components.

Social rituals also make sense when a vast number of people are crowded into tiny areas. The Japanese bow is the best known element of an elaborate system of social greetings and formalities. This ritual politeness provides a comfortable set of ground rules for avoiding social conflict, encouraging order, and protecting the boundaries of social groups and ranks.

As they enter public school, Japanese children are introduced to these practices and taught that harmony and order are social assumptions, not simply the rules of the school. Were this not true, the schools could not enforce the order that is obvious throughout Japan any more than American schools are able to maintain discipline and



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order when those values are not supported by a stable and predictable society.

But nothing is more striking to a visitor than the complexity and formality of the Japanese language, in both its written and spoken forms. The speaker adjusts the language to the person being spoken to, not just through the addition of polite expressions but by complete shifts in vocabulary and grammatical form. Talking to a friend is different from talking to a teacher. In Japanese writing the students are required to master four different types of script: the Chinese characters called kanji (of which there are said to be 50,000), two different forms of Japanese script, and the Roman alphabet. The Japanese are said to spend their lives learning to read and write their own language.

Combined with this fact is the cultural assumption that learning is a matter of absorbing knowledge and skill from experts; to learn is to copy. Like our children, the Japanese learn to write script by copying. But the volume of the characters to be learned requires a great deal of discipline and practice. The process appears to develop tendencies that can be transferred to other areas of learning, particularly those requiring memory. And it inculcates the notion that learners absorb knowledge by imitating the actions and attitudes of those older and wiser.

These characteristics have come to popular attention in the United States through the teaching of the martial arts and the use of the Suzuki method of music instruction.

My colleagues and I came to believe that these assumptions about learning are a crucial feature of Japanese schooling and one of its greatest strengths. Yet they are simultaneously a major weakness, encouraging a reliance on rote learning and discouraging the development of the questioning skills that are the ingredients of critical thinking.

Although Japan has been greatly influenced throughout its history by ideas imported from other nations—most notably China, England, and the United States—it has not had an influx of new peoples. The Japanese have remained remarkably homogeneous and have been able to integrate ideas into their basic national character. Maintaining this social homogeneity and cultural consistency is highly valued by the Japanese. We often heard the Japanese saying, "The nail that sticks up shall be pounded down." Individuality defined as uniqueness—an American value—is neither prized nor tolerated. Individuals do not strive to stand apart from the social group, nor have immigrant groups arrived to challenge the cultural values and social norms that define the essential Japanese character. Searching for the

common ground within the social group, seeking the point of view that can be generally embraced, and reaching decisions by consensus are tendencies encouraged by Japanese values and norms.

While such tendencies could be oppressive and stifling, we saw a wealth of gentle examples. Group activities in school are followed by critiquing sessions in which classmates comment on the performance, and the performing group is asked to be self-critical. The comments invariably contain elements of praise. This is also true of classrooms: teachers search for reasons to give praise; no one is singled out for embarrassing, isolating criticism.

In conjunction with valuing the norms of the social group, the Japanese value the group itself. They told us that this leads to the desire to become part of social groups and endows "rites of passage" with power and significance. The rigorous examinations that the Japanese must pass to enter high schools, colleges, and universities are not only academic hurdles but social doorways as well. While that is somewhat true of the more prestigious universities in this country, the situation is only analogous. Examinations in Japan are the sole criterion for admission, and failure to score at high levels is a personal and social burden of consequence. Roughly 80 percent of the executives of major Japanese corporations are graduates of Tokyo University. In that city, the race literally begins in kindergarten for the prize of admission to the university.

Education and Schooling

There is a distinction between education and schooling in Japan that partially redeems this process. Traditionally, the Japanese have deeply valued the educated person and the process of becoming educated. It is important, worthwhile, and a social expectation that one seeks to become educated regardless of social rewards. This in no way blunts the desire to pursue an education in a prestigious university—and by so doing to reap later economic benefits. But it does support a cultural perspective: those who have achieved deserve their status and economic reward. Those who have learned, yet not reached the same level have nonetheless pursued the



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wise and valuable course and are better for it.

Nor is education considered achievement only within the standard academic subjects. When Japanese school programs were reviewed and revised in the late 1970s, the purpose of schooling—the guiding principle for the revisions—was to “bring up children and pupils who are balanced in intellect, morality, and physical power and full of humanity.”

Japanese schools stress not only the academic subjects (which include the arts as a major component), but also moral, physical, social, and cultural education. In the latter pursuit, Japanese students may spend more than 30 school days each year on field trips to cultural sites and institutions in their region.

The role of the school is to promote an education that is consonant with and supportive of the dominant cultural values and social norms and goals. Each school program and activity has to be understood and analyzed from that perspective.

The Japanese are currently worried about aspects of this schooling. They have undertaken another review that is dominated by several major concerns: the growing incidence of school disruption and violence, the possible detrimental effects of the examination systems, and over-reliance on rote learning of massive amounts of information. Curiously, these are comparable to current areas of concern in the United States. Both nations are proposing tighter measures where they feel they have been lax and more relaxed measures where they have been rigid. Ironically, the directions are almost reversed. The Japanese are looking for a greater relevance for school content and are considering reducing the amount of material to be taught, thus lessening the examination burden.

The Role of the Family

The most striking aspect of current Japanese thinking about these matters is the assumption that many of the crucial solutions are not to be found in the school but in the family. Educators in the United States often make this claim, but they are judged to be abandoning their responsibilities when they do so. On the contrary, the Japa-



The Japanese mother, whose responsibility it is to oversee the education of her children and to oversee nightly homework, often enrolls her children in juku, supplementary private schools widely used to give added instruction in everything from dance to mathematics.

nese accept this notion as self-evident and have begun to examine how parents can play an even greater role in the education and training of their children.

It is difficult to imagine, however, how they can do more than they do now. The Japanese family is the repository and bulwark of all cultural values and social norms and goals. Though it is now being buffeted by a variety of economic and demographic storms that may in time bring the type of fragmentation we have in this country, the family is still the stable and deep core of Japanese society. For instance, there is virtually no divorce in Japan. As a result, there is not a significant incidence of single-parent households with their concomitant strain on the time, energy, and financial resources of a single parent. Both parents are on

hand to collaborate in fulfilling their expected social functions.

The role of the Japanese mother has recently received special attention in the United States. It is she who watches over the nightly homework; searches the public and private schools to decide which will best prepare her children for the university and college examinations; arranges their enrollment in *juku*, the supplementary private schools widely used to give added instruction in everything from dance to mathematics; and serves as a constant reminder of the children's expected performance level.

Mothers seem more than willing to carry out these functions, but the role is sustained as well by the overall place of women in Japanese society. We met no women in any positions of authority in the schools, the government, or the private company we visited. Though the number of women as teachers in the elementary and secondary schools has grown in recent years—suggesting future changes—men still dominate the world outside the home. Women are expected to attend to the inner world of the family, in which the education of children is a central concern.

Comparing Japanese and American Schooling

As we traveled Japan, these underlying cultural and social conditions thrust themselves more and more into our interpretations of the schooling experiences we examined. For instance, we were greatly interested in the amount of time students spend in school. The Japanese school year is 240 days long,

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compared with about 180 days in this country, and students there attend school six days per week. Much has been made of these facts in recent reports in this country, linking time in school to student achievement. But we found that no simple comparison could be made between the two calendars. For instance, during the six-day week, students attend school a half day on Saturday and may have a reduced day one other day of the week. Over the course of a year, students may spend as many as 30 days out of school visiting cultural institutions and sites. Nor is each subject taught every day. On the other hand, a great many students attend private supplementary schools after the regular school day and take a variety of subjects for enrichment or to prepare for examinations. And students spend time each evening doing homework, sometimes with parental assistance. Thus, we found it difficult to develop a clear comparison of the amount of time Japanese students spend studying a subject with the time spent by students in this country.

But what became obvious and more compelling to us was the intensity of student concentration, which was the result of more than mere allocation of time. The educational contexts—school, *juku*, home—are stable, reinforcing environments; learning is highly valued; discipline is inculcated by a variety of crucial social forces; quality performance is expected from students. In short, the time for learning is structured and student attention focused by a complex system of cultural and social pressures.

This is *not* an argument against increasing allocated time in our schools. But if we do, we need to understand how the use of time functions to express and reinforce cultural and social values and how time spent in school is part of the web of time in a society.

We developed a similar attitude toward other features of Japanese schools. There is no question that the content of Japanese mathematics and science classes is more complex and challenging than that found in a typical classroom in this country, particularly in the elementary and middle schools.

But there is also social promotion, and while there is a growing awareness of the need for compensatory education, there is very little currently being done within Japanese schools to deal with those who cannot keep pace. If we were to dramatically increase the complexity of science content in our elementary schools, we would, at least in the short run, be faced with the question of whether to retain or promote students who fail, and we would be forced to shift resources to this subject area.

These decisions are possible for us, but they have ramifications, not the least of which is that the great value placed on education in Japan translates into money and prestige. Japanese teachers are well paid and the profession is esteemed. Japanese schools have not yet felt the drain of their talent into more lucrative careers. While the American public is said to be pressing for more science in our schools, there is no evidence that the public has yet considered the societal changes that must be made to make this truly possible.

The lure of Japan is its image of economic success. While instruction in math and science no doubt play some part in that success, more fundamental reasons can be found in those underlying cultural and social forces that shape the entire nation. Math and science are not the only manifestations of those forces within the school. Nothing is more compelling about Japanese schools than the attention paid to language and art, those two embodiments of a people and their culture. It could be argued with considerable justification that these two areas of study directly reinforce the values, discipline, and norms of the nation, and are much more integral to Japanese success than mathematics, science, or technical subjects.

Certainly, more time is devoted to Japanese language than to any other subject and, taking into account both classwork and cultural trips and experiences, instruction in the arts easily rivals any other subject in time and importance. In fact, instruction in the arts is the most visibly vibrant of the school programs we saw and illuminated by contrast the more typical style of teaching. That style, in both the elementary and secondary schools, overwhelmingly belonged to teachers lecturing to classes of 40 students. Direct instruction of this kind is the easiest way to impart large bodies of information and content, the objectives the Japanese have been accenting in their schools. But it is not the way to help students learn to think independently or critically, outcomes to which the Japanese, until recently, have not attached value in school or society.

But change may be coming. As the Japanese have forged to the front in electronically related fields, they have exhausted the original models they imported from other countries to guide them. Now they must make their own: a type of creativity that poses a different kind of challenge, one that relies—at least in the experience of the West—more on individual imagination and ingenuity. In fact, Japanese commentators have begun to ask whether some of the vaunted breakthroughs in Japanese industry were no more the result of this type of thinking than the well-publicized adherence to group consensus.

On this point current Japanese in-



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terest and ours converge. The Japanese Ministry of Education has asked its major advisory council for advice on how the schools might better stimulate student thinking. In this country we are posing much the same question as we envision a future in which the performance of even basic functions will require complex thinking skills. This could be a fruitful topic of discussion between educators from the two nations.

But one point will still hold true: the extent to which school practices will contribute successfully to student growth in these skills depends on the extent to which those practices express and find support in the culture and society. The Japanese are clear about this and sense such a development as a potential threat to the existing fabric and tradition of the nation. For us, individuality is a central tenet, and school practices aimed at promoting independence express a quintessentially American value. The Japanese will have to see our practices in context before assuming they will pay dividends for them.

Our Conclusions

If school practices cannot be readily transported from one nation to another, what lessons can be learned from the type of study we undertook in Japan? There are at least three.

First, our examination of Japanese schools clarified, by comparison and contrast, practices in our own schools. Ezra Pound said that it is best to study two poems rather than one. Specific features can be seen and understood much more readily when the two are placed side by side. In our observations it was immediately clear that there are significant differences between Japanese and American math and science curriculums and in the methods of teaching art. No quick conclusions should be drawn from these facts, but they are the essential beginning and the provocation for further analysis.

Second, the examination clarified the role of cultural values and social norms and conditions in shaping the practices of the school. This pursuit illuminates much about Japan and is intellectually gratifying in its own right, but it also throws into relief the contours of our own culture and society and places our schools within that landscape. Will art ever have the role in our schools that it has in a more traditional culture?

Third, the search uncovers common human longings. Specific expressions vary, but people are people. We are puzzled by the behavior of another society because we expect people to act the same. It is valuable to see how current behavior reflects patterns that have developed over time to meet human needs and fulfill human aspirations. When we see this in others, we can see it in ourselves and join more intelligently and empathetically in a discussion of how our various behaviors can be fit together to create a world of peace and harmony.

Each of these lessons is worth learning. Each provides the starting point for continuing analysis and discussion. None, however, offers an immediate remedy for the anxiety Americans are feeling about our society and its reflection in the public schools. No such remedy can be found that does not spring from the resources, values, and goals of the American people themselves. Japan offers lessons, not solutions. □

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