

The Teaching Profession: A View from Japan

By examining the role of the teacher in Japanese schools, we can discover directions to follow—and to avoid—in developing the teaching profession in our own country.

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In Japanese schools, teachers of primary children instill love of learning and love of school in their students; at the upper levels teachers become less openly affectionate but maintain close and important relations with their older charges.

Many books and articles on the merits of Japanese education have recently appeared, followed by the inevitable backlash of commentary about what is wrong with Japanese education. Surprisingly, the role of the teaching profession itself has received little attention in this dialogue, despite the fact that East Asian cultures place great importance on the modeling that "virtuous persons" provide. Because the teacher¹ appears to be the pivotal person in the Japanese educational system, we decided to examine the roles, responsibilities, and rewards of Japan's teachers.

Over a two-year period, we observed countless classrooms, conducted many interviews with instructors, and attended professional meetings. We draw here particularly from our 1985-87 study of over one hundred "master teacher-principals" throughout Japan.

Teachers as Virtuous Persons

The Japanese educational system is far from perfect; in fact, Japanese educators have expressed incredulity whenever we have complimented some feature of the system. Nevertheless, the high level of knowledge possessed by Japanese graduates has been well documented by their consistently high scores on tests of international achievement. Social problems are rare in Japanese schools, and graduates make a successful transition to the labor force (Rohlen 1983, Duke 1986, Cummings 1980, Kobayashi 1978, White 1987). What role do teachers play in achieving this success?

In her vivid account of Japanese education, Merry White (1987) notes, "In East Asian tradition, teaching is a respected profession, a lifetime commitment, a much sought after occupation. . . . Because learning and the ensuing academic credentials are the most valued pursuits and goals in contemporary Japanese life, teachers are still greatly valued."²

The influence of the virtuous person is incalculable throughout Japanese society. Superiors in the workplace, the school, and the home have a highly refined, complex relationship

with those below them. Moreover, these relationships extend over the life span.

Teachers are not only instructional leaders; they are also important symbolic figures in the school, an embodiment of the traditions and character of the school. Warm and affectionate, teachers in the elementary grades are more like big brothers and sisters, instilling a love of school and learning in students. Stern and distant, teachers at the upper levels are super-parent figures, yet still symbolize the intimate relationship that, once developed in preschool and primary school, continues to exist between Japanese teacher and student.

On the opening and closing days of school and after each vacation, teachers are expected to give inspirational speeches. The content of the talks invariably touches on one or more of the following themes:

- responsibility for one's actions, including a reminder that good behavior (including sincere effort in studies) reflects well on one's school and one's family;
- the fact that all students are representatives of their school;
- the unacceptable nature of behavior that spoils the school name for all (one important duty of teachers is patrolling local hangouts such as game centers and magazine stands);

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• a reminder that to succeed in entrance exams and in life, early preparation and hard study are required.

Expectations are high that behavior will be proper and that all students will try their hardest at everything they attempt. These expectations are part of the cultural consensus of what it means to be Japanese. Cooperation and harmony are valued above all else and lie at the core of the Japanese emphasis on excellence in an organization's internal relations and activities. Shame is great indeed if the student fails to succeed, but to fail *without trying* is cause for even greater shame.

How Japanese Teachers Teach

When they teach, Japanese teachers treat their classes as a whole rather than as individuals. There is a great concern with teaching to the average student, and Japanese teachers spend the least amount of time with the top students in a class. Elementary school teachers focus on active, engaged learning, while high school teachers employ a text-centered, lecture format. Middle school instructors play a transitional role.

Because of the uniform pace and common curriculum, Japanese teachers usually use commercially prepared tests for evaluation, rather than preparing their own tests as in the U.S.³ The aim of these tests is to provide a step-by-step evaluation process leading to a set of final exams that, almost alone, determines the high school or college a student will attend. Because teachers do not need to devote extra time to test preparation, students can be more frequently evaluated and their problems more readily identified and addressed. Moreover, once problems are diagnosed, there is a support system of commercial tuition academies (*juku*) readily available for those students who need extra work.

Ultimate responsibility for the students is left with the teachers as a collective body, with the principal considered "first among equals" among teachers. Thomas Rohlen (1983) notes the "sociocentric qualities" of Japanese teaching: the faculty takes full responsibility for student be-

havior and discipline, with teachers typically serving on a number of committees that have authority and power usually reserved for administrators in American schools.

Relationship to the Principal

Respect for knowledge endows special meaning to the symbolic position of the principal, or *koobo sensei*, translated as "principal teacher." The basis of teacher-principal relations is the delegation of authority by the principal to the teachers. The principal gives advice and guidance to teachers, and in return the teachers provide the same for the principal.

Significantly, the Japanese give little consideration to the notion that a good teacher might differ qualitatively from a good administrator or a good policymaker. In Japan, all administrators and nearly all the staff of local boards of education have been evaluated as outstanding teachers. Principals (average age, 55) have thus undergone an evaluation period of at least 20-25 years of teaching before attaining that title.

Compensation and Status

The high quality of Japanese teaching is linked not simply to cultural factors but to a stable, well-paid support system. Salaries vary from over \$20,000 for a beginning elementary teacher to \$45,000 for a 40-year-old teacher to \$70,000 for a 55-year-old principal. From entry level to about age 35, a Japanese teacher earns more than peers in other jobs and about the same as those in other professions. Centrally

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determined and uniform throughout the nation, salary schedules are based on seniority. Purchasing power is, on average, equivalent in both countries; but at the upper levels, where there are many more Japanese teachers, purchasing power is much greater in Japan. Japanese teachers receive at least 70 days of holidays, fewer than American teachers but more than four or five times as much time off as Japanese in other jobs.

Other important factors in a teacher's life include an expected rotation between schools after four to seven years. This practice helps the local educational authorities maintain fairly consistent staffing, in terms of quality. Pupil-teacher ratios (1:35), class size (up to 45-50), and duties (including counseling and curriculum) borne by Japanese teachers are considerably greater than those of their U.S. counterparts.

The attractiveness of the teaching profession is demonstrated, though, by the ratio of applicants to available positions (5:1 in 1986) and the fact that beginning salaries are on a par with those of graduates entering the corporate world. Teaching is not only well rewarded and sought after, it is also accorded much respect by the public. Depending on the academic status of a given school, Japanese teachers command what an American might feel is an inordinately high status. In a 1975 status survey of occupations (Japanese Social Mobility Survey, cited by Cummings 1980), elementary teachers enjoyed higher prestige than civil or mechanical engineers and white-collar employees of large firms. University professors ranked third, below high court lawyers and presidents of large companies, but above physicians.

Solidarity

The way the Japanese deal with personnel matters at all levels in their schools is undoubtedly at the heart of their educational success. The key is solidarity. Great emphasis is placed on social order and commonly shared identity and purpose. Common values include dedication, high morale, motivation, obedience, discipline, and group-centeredness. Intense personal commitment to the common endeavor is paramount and is inculcated early in the experience.

Initiation activities, for example, involve everyone. New people, whether

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students or teachers, are the center of attention, but the initiation in no way resembles hazing. The purpose is to make newcomers feel welcome and relieve any anxieties they may feel about their new status.

At the same time, the hierarchy of the workplace is made clear in subtle ways. Extreme deference in speech indicates who is at the top of the hierarchy. During a personnel initiation party shortly after joining a school, for instance, the person whose beer is poured first, the person who comments on the nature of the food served, and the person who suggests that it is time to go home are all senior people in the school hierarchy.

There are many opportunities for such interaction. In the life of typical Japanese teachers, parties can be expected on all the following occasions: beginning the new job, promotion, transfer, extended trip abroad, publication of a book, marriage, retirement, even death. When a colleague dies, all his or her fellow workers come to pay special respect by eating and drinking sumptuously in a room containing a photograph of the deceased. The average contribution for a typical dinner among peers is ¥ 5,000-7,000 (or \$35-\$55). The ritualization of many transitions is extended and complex, and attendance is *de rigueur*. If the event is particularly important, such as a year-end party, the cost can easily jump to \$150 per person. The end-of-year party and school excursions such as field trips (for which there are elaborate preparations) are particularly important.

Labor and Management

In Japan, teachers' relationships with administrators are usually not as tense as in the U.S., but they can become hostile if the local teachers' union is powerful or if the principal evinces strong executive or rightist tendencies. The leftist Japanese teachers' union, Nikkyoso, has great power, making it unlikely that any one person will rise very far above his or her colleagues. After all, most principals, except those who inherit their positions in private schools, have risen through the ranks themselves.

The principal is ostensibly the government's representative, but most principals have been unwilling to exert this authority. Instead, in keeping with the "first among equals" idea, principals quietly attend daily or weekly staff meetings conducted to exchange opinions (many schools have brief meetings every morning).

Moreover, labor-management confrontation is unlikely because of the school's status as a moral institution. Open conflict or politics of any kind is traditionally forbidden. If a principal has good rapport with the senior teachers, he or she may be able to implement novel ideas; but most principals choose to be unobtrusive.

The situation in schools was not always this way. The principal's position derived its legitimacy from a rigid, paternalistic interpretation of Confucianism; and, before the American occupation, the principal cut a powerful swath in the local community, with almost complete power over teachers. Japanese society in turn had great expectations of its principals; the schools they administered were (and still are to a great extent) regarded as images of the people who ran them. The principal was the personification of the ideal Confucian patriarch.

Ironically, the American presence after the war ended this model, a model many American administrators may now wish existed in the United States. General MacArthur's reforms created one of the most egalitarian and productive (in terms of academic achievement and social placement) educational systems the world has known (Cummings 1980). The egalitarian spirit of the U.S.-inspired "Peace Constitution" led to the formation of a militant teachers' union, the *Nikk-yoso*; thus, at the same time that the

power of rank-and-file teachers dramatically increased, the authority and aura of the principal were considerably diminished.

With the School Education Law of 1947 as a focus of reforms, the American occupation created progressive forces advocating this strong trade union for teachers. These forces urged that schools convey an egalitarian world view and consider their primary mission to develop "the whole person" (Duke 1973). Conservatives, however, advocated strong central control (by the Ministry of Education, or *Mombusho*) and an educational system whose purpose was utilitarian, as the primary agent in social selection. Central to this purpose has been the rigorous gauntlet of examinations that functionally determines job placement.

Central to this conflict was whether teachers would be defined as workers or as professionals. Defining teachers as workers would portray them as potential class enemies of administrators. The struggle eventually centered on whether teachers or the central government would control the curriculum, with the latter more or less the eventual victor.

To increase control over local units, the Ministry of Education has periodically proposed expansion of the administrative components of schools. In 1971, for example, the government proposed a restructuring of school administration that was supposed to make life easier for the teachers, a proposal strongly opposed by the teachers' union. In the end, the old system of principal (*kocho*) and his assistant (*kyoto*, a position introduced in the 1950s in spite of vehement teacher protest) was retained. A new

set of administrative posts was created, however: a chair of teaching affairs, a kind of curriculum coordinator and business manager who is also in charge of scheduling, chairs for each grade, subject matter chairs; and a student-guidance chair. A small stipend is attached to each position. These reforms, introduced in the late 1950s and still in place, tended to increase the power of the central government in local schools.

A more important issue involved the government's effort to provide principals and local boards with greater control over procedures concerning teacher salaries and promotions. Laws created during the American occupation had in effect given teachers tenure as soon as they were hired. Salaries were determined according to a simple schedule based on seniority, with no allowance for performance.

In the mid-1950s, conservative leaders advocated a trial period prior to tenure and the introduction of an "efficiency rating system." The trial period never materialized, and the government's efforts to implement the rating scheme provoked a violent and protracted struggle with teachers in the late 1950s. Mass sit-ins, strikes, and a mass leave-taking on a single day by 35,000 Tokyo union teachers, together with the heavy-handed tactics of the government, brought the confrontation to a stalemate. The union eventually began to lose membership as its leaders advocated extreme tactics.

Fortunately for the union, the government's attention during the 1960s became engrossed in the struggle over the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty. Finally, a face-saving compromise on the rating scheme was worked out whereby teachers would submit a record of their activities to the principal, who would fill out the ratings for submission to the local board of education. Possibly because they had to consult with their teachers first, principals ended up giving uniformly favorable marks to all their staff.

What has been the outcome of this protracted struggle? Cummings (1980) reported that a survey of 685 teachers in the Kansai area revealed that 84 percent considered themselves educational workers, 4 percent chose "production-line worker," and 12 percent viewed themselves as professionals. There is general support for the

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union's activities as long as it does not resort to strikes or other extreme tactics. As for internal school management, nearly 60 percent of those surveyed saw the school staff meeting as the final decision-making body for school policy, a view opposite to that of the government, which holds that the principals have this responsibility. In the same poll, teachers reported that they wanted more control over the school and classroom because of the belief that education changes society rather than being controlled by society.

Teachers in Japan in the 1980s

Today, public acceptance of more traditional role models is growing. Not only has the power of Nikkyoso diminished considerably (few younger teachers see any point in joining the union), but certain traditional ideas about teachers are again current, albeit tempered with more democratic ideals. The idea that the teacher's primary duty is to act as moral preceptor for both staff and students is being revived.

Today, a good teacher in Japan works hard to promote behavior traditionally associated with good schools: a high level of involvement with students, especially in club activities; certain administrative duties that Americans might consider the prerogative of principals; a growing distaste for partisan politics; and a sense of autonomy. Although they work much longer hours than their American counterparts, Japanese teachers have a measure of freedom that is the envy of salaried workers and an income that is considerably greater than that of government officials. As in America, however, public concern with high achievement in schools in terms of test results has meant increased emphasis on discipline and exam preparation.

To the Future

If we look at the way Japanese teachers view American education, we may see directions in which they might (or might not) like to move. Beginning with a Ford Foundation program in the 1960s and continuing today under the support of the Ministry of Education, teacher study programs have brought large numbers of Japanese

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teachers to America (recently about 5,000 a year). We have heard many informal comments from teachers who return from these programs, comments similar to those made in a follow-up evaluation of the Ford program.⁴ These comments give us insight into the advantages and disadvantages of our own system.

What are the pluses in American education, as viewed by Japanese observers? High-quality facilities, the individual creativity and initiative of both teachers and students, the careful attention paid to differences in abilities, and the active involvement of a class in the learning process. Minuses? The great gap between American educators' ideals and actual classroom practices, the lack of a systematic approach to education, the great diversity between school districts, and the absence of moral education.

If we are to learn from the Japanese, and if the Japanese are to learn from us, it might be best simply to reflect on the power of the teacher as symbol. For America, no less than for Japan, the traditional Confucian concept of the teacher as a virtuous person, someone committed to the nurturance of human relations, is a role worth emphasis and respect. Most important, an explicit awareness of the role of cultural values and expectations in the school can help us strengthen our own commitment to teachers and to education.

We cannot and should not wish to copy the Japanese. Our educational roots, a combination of the traditions of Rousseau, Dewey, and Calvin, are

too different. But, as White (1987) notes, we have much to learn from the Japanese about commitment, expectations, and effort. What she calls the "high energy engagement" of good teachers is something our society should learn to recognize and reward. The Japanese are vigilant in keeping their cultural values and practices at the core of their educational practices. We, too, would do well to give greater emphasis to the power of our own cultural consensus. We should be true to our own roots. □

1. *Sensei*, literally "one who goes before."

2. White, 1987, p. 82. This quotation is from a chapter titled "A Paradise for Teachers?" Many teachers are reluctant to consider the job of principal because it requires mandatory retirement at the age of 60, pays hardly more than 10 percent over a typical teacher's salary, and means greatly increased duties.

3. Cummings, 1986, p. 126

4. Cummings, 1986, p. 282

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