

Teaching Empathy: Family and Education in Japan

By *Tsuneyoshi Ryoko*

A Brief Visit to a Japanese Elementary School

Being a researcher who conducts school observations regularly, I often have the opportunity to take visitors from other cultures to Japanese schools. It is thus most interesting to watch the reactions of foreign visitors as they enter Japanese elementary school classrooms.

Compared to the austerity of the appearance of a typical Japanese school building with little color, the visitor is often surprised to find that the inside of the building contains almost the opposite of what the visual impressions of the building would suggest. The corridors are filled with children who are playing with each other in loud, cheerful voices. They are often running after each other, sometimes even tumbling over each other. The presence of a visitor hardly intimidates them, and very soon the visitor finds a crowd of children snuggling up around him/her, asking wild questions, like whether he/she has a boy friend or girl friend. A visitor who can understand what is said will notice that the younger children hardly seem to be distinguishing the language they use towards their friends, and what they are saying to their teachers. Groups of children might snuggle up to a teacher, calling, "Ne, ne, sensei, asobo yo" ("Hey, hey, teacher, let's play").

Looking around the classrooms and playground during recess, visitors might see children clustering around a certain faculty, sometimes climbing up on their backs or dangling from their arms. Western visitors are often especially surprised when they see little girls in skirts climbing onto the backs of young male faculty or huddling up to them, and remark that these days, young male teachers in their country feel restrained from engaging in such



school building

physical contact. Even during class, especially in the lower grades, the children seem to be shouting out answers, and everyone seems to be very eager to talk.

Faced with such scenes, visitors from Western countries will often say things like:

"Why don't the teachers scold the children?"

"Doesn't so much noise bother the teachers?"

Visitors would remember the reserved Japanese adults they had met in Japan so far, and have difficulty linking the image of these adults with the carefree behavior of the children they witness before them.

When encountering scenes of children cleaning the classroom, since in Japan, it is a standard practice to ask children to clean the school grounds so that they can develop a sense of responsibility and also acquire the social skills involved in cooperating in a task,

Western visitors are often surprised at how the tasks are executed. Instead of each student being quietly dedicated to his/her task, visitors often see a classroom which at first sight looks rather chaotic, as children, especially the younger ones, are tumbling over each other with their cleaning cloths and brooms in hand. The classroom teacher seems oblivious to this commotion, quietly sweeping the floor with a broom in her/his hand as the children tumble around her/him. I remember visitors mumbling things like the following:

"The children don't seem to be taking their task very seriously."

"The teachers aren't very strict. This is definitely not what we were told happens in Japanese classrooms."

Even visitors from countries like Korea, who recognize many of the elements present in the Japanese classrooms, such as desks in straight rows, and whole-class instruction, tend

to be surprised that teacher disciplining seems to be so loose compared to what they are used to in their own country.

A visit to a Japanese elementary school classroom, therefore, offers an opportunity for visitors to reconsider some of the stereotypical images of the reserved and shy Japanese sometimes prevalent abroad. The same could not be said of a visit to a secondary school classroom, however, as students become more focused on study and also become increasingly self-conscious.

Such discrepancies between what a visitor might expect in Japanese classrooms (e.g., order and discipline), and what they witness (e.g., high levels of noise and movement), have been analyzed by scholars from the United States who have conducted observations of Japanese preschool and elementary school classrooms. One common explanation for such teacher and pupil behavior has been that developing social skills or interpersonal skills is one of the major focuses of Japanese preschools and elementary schools. Thus, though from the viewpoint of cleaning the classroom, children tumbling over each other does not make sense, from the viewpoint of encouraging children to become acquainted with each other and to develop social skills, such behavior indeed is very educational. Another often-mentioned reason is the tradition of raising children leniently—at least until a certain age—a point to which we will now turn.

Physical Closeness and the Japanese Tradition

Historically, the Japanese child rearing tradition has repeatedly been described as lenient, tolerant, even overindulgent by Western standards. In preindustrial Japan, most of the population lived in villages, and proverbs described children as “among the gods until seven,” or that they were “uncontaminated and sinless.” Children were sometimes given special roles in the sacred village festivals, since they were considered to be close to the gods. Evil was generally attributed to the outside world, in other

words, the world of adults. Children were pure until they were “contaminated” by the vices of the grown-up world. Thus, the traditional Japanese mode of childrearing was said to be *laissez faire*, leaving things to their natural course of development, so that the inherent good in the child might unfold—as opposed to active “disciplining.”

Western missionaries, and visitors to Japan, have often left records of the “lenient” Japanese childrearing practices. Children were described as being fed on demand, carried on the caretaker’s back, and sleeping next to their caretakers. This was contrasted with the stricter attitudes of the West, especially the West of a few generations ago, which stressed strict feeding schedules, physical independence, and letting the child “cry it out” so not to spoil him/her and to protect spousal privacy.

In the postwar Japanese context, where the U.S. emerged as Japan’s model of a democratic society, Japanese childrearing practices were often contrasted with “American” practices of childrearing. The so-called American practices of separate rooms (or at least beds) for the parents and children, of stressing spousal relationships, was seen as consistent with the Western ideal of individualism and democratic family relationships—something Japanese should uncritically copy. Benjamin Spock’s famous book on childrearing was translated into Japanese, and Japanese parents read with enthusiasm, words of advice which cautioned the parents against “spoiling,” and which advised them to prepare separate rooms for the parents and child, or if that is not possible, to at least use a screen to divide the child from the parents. This vision lay in sharp contrast to the more physically intimate type of traditional Japanese family relationship, where the little child sleeps in-between the mother and father, a practice which is called

“*kawanoji ni neru*,” in other words, “sleeping in the form of the character meaning river” (meaning literally that the family sleeps next to each other in a formation reminiscent of the Chinese character indicating a river—川).

Today, traditional Japanese childrearing practices such as co-sleeping and carrying children on one’s back (*onbu*), which were decried by specialists under Western influence a few generations ago, have experienced a revival, at least in the advice given to parents. This coincides with a period in the West when some of the excesses of the modern Western individualist perspective stressing the physical separation of the parent and child have been questioned by developments in psychology and other disciplines. Seen from the viewpoint of the child, responding to the child’s crying and needs for physical contact, etc., which were seen as “spoiling” the child a generation ago, have been redefined as acts of caring which will make the child more secure and emotionally stable, thus enabling him/her to become independent later.

Moreover, in modernized and urbanized societies, where traditional tight-knit—sometimes oppressive—community networks have given way to impersonal and distant relationships, where the number of children are fewer and the society is such that interrelationships are in general impersonal and distant, the lack of basic interpersonal skills among children—the extreme case being acts of violence—is urging



a chart for assigning where to clean for cleaning duty

people to reevaluate the importance of basic social skills, such as empathy and self-restraint, which enable people to coexist in a society.

Childrearing manuals in countries such as the United Kingdom and the U.S. now stress the importance of physical contact, which is seen as providing emotional stability and security to the child. Authors sometimes quite openly question the premise which has supported Western childrearing practices emphasizing separation between children and caretakers.

A representative British author, whose books are also bestsellers in the U.S., maintains:

Many mothers, health visitors and doctors believe that such crying for company is in some way illegitimate... Usually it is the specter of spoiling which leads to this irrational behavior towards infants... Yet only Western cultures tend to take this attitude towards babies. It is only we to whom it ever occurs to leave a baby alone for long periods... The fear of spoiling a baby of this age is a tragic one... They only want as much as they need. Given what they need, they will not demand more. Indeed given what they need when they show they need it, they will tend to demand less and less (Penelope Leach, *Babyhood*, second edition, London: Penguin Books, 1983 (1974), pp. 244-5)

In the U.S. as well, practices such as conflict resolution and anti-violence programs, which stress social skills such as empathy, cooperation, impulse control, and anger management, have found their ways into classrooms, as more and more teachers are faced with children they cannot control and children who do not seem to be able to control themselves.

Japanese society, despite its ideology which stresses closer physical contact and an communal outlook compared to



playing games

the West, is also undergoing changes which other industrialized countries have experienced several decades earlier. For example, in recent months, several highly sensationalized incidents, involving junior high school students with knives in schools, have shocked the Japanese public, as they watch on television scenes which they never associated with children in their own country. The government has responded to the "crisis," and the media has sensationalized the issue.

As the 21st century draws near, people around the world are struggling to adopt new models as old models become outdated. In Japan, there is much talk in the media about adopting the "Anglo-Saxon model" (usually seen as individualistic, competitive, and achievement-oriented) especially in business, but also in education as well.

At the same time, there are also efforts that are more reminiscent of the Japanese tradition, such as kindergartens which include periods to help children acquire interpersonal skills by consciously stressing physical contact with each other in a manner that was prevalent in Japanese society a few generations ago, but which is no longer as common in contemporary Japan.

Emotional Closeness

Physical closeness is not the only trait seen as characteristic of Japanese childrearing practices in the past. The emotional closeness between the

caretaker and the child, and in the postwar context, especially the mother and child, has often been described as "Japanese" in comparison to the Western tradition. The stress in Japanese society on empathy is a theme which has been confirmed by many studies. As the Japanologist Takie S. Lebra once put it in her book, *Japanese Patterns of Behavior*, "I am even tempted to call Japanese culture an 'omoiyari

culture'" (a culture of empathy). (University of Hawaii Press, 1976, p.38)

More recent studies have found that Japanese middle class mothers tend to stress empathetic skills in children, as contrasted with the stress American mothers placed on parental authority. For example, R. Hess, H. Azumi and others (H.W. Stevenson and others eds., *Child Development and Education in Japan*, Freeman, 1986) found that Japanese mothers tended to appeal more to the child's emotions, to empathetic skills, when they were dissatisfied with the child's behavior, while mothers in the U.S. more often insisted that the child listen because she was "the mother." An example of the former method of persuasion would be to stress how the mother would feel, after putting so much effort into preparing a meal for the child, if the child was picky about what to eat; the latter example might include a case where the mother would tell the child to simply "listen to me," by stressing parental authority.

Words which stress empathetic skills such as "consideration" (*omoiyari*) and "kindness" (*yasashisa*) abound in Japanese society. For example, driving on a highway one might look up to see the slogan "Kind Driving" (*yasashii unten*), walking into the post office, one might encounter the slogan, "Considerate Service" (*shinsetsuna otai*).

Such stress on empathetic traits is also

one of the major emphases of the Japanese school, especially in the formative years of preschool and elementary school. The Ministry of Education in Japan publishes guidebooks for teachers to assist them in their daily instruction, and one of the publications is a book on developing "empathy." An example from the booklet illustrates the tendency of instruction in empathy in Japanese schools.

In a section titled "Though lunch time started late....," the booklet cites an incident at one elementary school where one of the children in charge of serving lunch to the others, A, mistakenly spilled miso soup into the salad bowl of another classmate, B. Since in Japanese schools, groups of children serve lunch to other classmates, this is something that is very apt to happen in any school around the country. In this case, B became angry and insisted that he couldn't eat salad which was soaked in miso soup. A apologized at first, but stiffened her attitude since B's anger did not recede, and started insisting that she too, was doing her best to fulfill her role as the

lunch server. Thus, the classroom teacher decided to have the class discuss the incident, since it was an ideal opportunity to have the children think about empathy and tolerance, as well as selfishness. In the beginning, the other children were simply blaming the two classmates A and B for their behavior; some simply wanted to start eating since it was "none of their business." The teacher then started to remind the children of various cases within the class where classmates had disagreed. How did both sides feel then? What went wrong? Children started to empathize, and eventually, A apologized to the class, saying that since she was the one who spilled the miso soup, she should have just given B her bowl. B then started to apologize

for being so rigid about a little miso soup in his salad. Then the other children stated that they were sorry they had acted as if the incident was none of their business. They also apologized to the teacher for causing trouble. Finally, the teacher apologized to the class for starting lunch late.

Japanese Schools

The previously stated example of lunch illustrates a major characteristic of the Japanese school in comparison to its counterpart in Western countries.



social studies

Japanese schools have periods called "special activities" which include items such as classroom activities, school events, and lunch instruction. The sphere of education is conceived very widely, and character education is very much a part of the public school curriculum. "Special activities" are designed to encourage cooperative and productive interpersonal relationships, and feelings of mutual support through engaging in specific activities such as serving lunch together.

It is standard practice in Japanese schools to break the classroom up into small groups, and to give each group a chore which they will take responsibility for and carry out together. Student monitors are also widely used as a means to help children organize them-

selves.

The faculty share a big wide room where they face each other and can communicate frequently—just like the large room arrangement of the Japanese company office—and frequent meetings signal the beginning and end of the day for both faculty and children.

Living conditions which support and necessitate frequent interaction, interdependence, and close relationships characterize traditional communities in general. However, a major Japanese characteristic is that it has incorporated this ideology, and a structure which supports it, into key organizations such as the school and company in a contemporary context. Thus, the Japanese style of management in business has its counterpart in the school-house.

At the same time, within Japan, calls for reform have arisen in education, as they have in the areas of business and politics. In a borderless society where competition is intense and global, there has been a growing support for a more individualistic and competitive model than what is in existence, and business leaders are calling for strengthening Japan's ability to compete globally. In addition, changes in society, such as the diversification of lifestyles and values, is making it difficult for Japanese to maintain the Japanese school model unaltered in its present form. Thus, Japanese schools have become vulnerable, yet creative and exciting places, as they struggle to adopt new models, while incorporating elements of both the East and the West, the legacies of the past, and the visions of a different future. **JJI**

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