学校教育の文化的な意味合いへの一考察・日本の場合
An Argument for Cultural Meanings of Schooling: The Japanese Case

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ABSTRACT

　この論文では，文化的側面から日本の伝統的教育目標を概観し，現在の学力の国際比較調査の結果と比較分析した上でその妥当性を考察する．本論文では2004年の7月に13人のアメリカ人教育者に対して行われた日本の学校教育に関するワークショップに基づき，日本の教育における集団の意義，個人の学習用具等に対する管理責任，さらに家族の役割や塾産業も含めた様々な文化的背景が日本の学校教育にとって重要な特徴であると促える．

　文化的コンテクストの中で表面化する様々な教育目標と，国際的学力テスト業界の測定基準とのずれをグローバル化する今日の状況との関連において考察した．

AN ARGUMENT FOR CULTURAL MEANINGS OF SCHOOLING: THE JAPANESE CASE

Globalization of educational objectives has intensified in the advanced world as governments increasingly draw political capital from international achievement comparisons, such as the TIMSS (NCES, 2003) and the PISA (OECD, 2003). In these politics, diverse cultural modes of schooling and educational objectives become lost. While efforts are made to look at students' socioeconomic background factors and differences in teaching styles (Hiebert et al, 2003), these quantitative indicators reveal little about the culture and meanings of schooling in participating nations, leaving us in the somewhat Keynesian position that there is a unitary, measurable, standard "good" sort of education, and that, national education systems held accountable to this standard (because, increasingly, their legitimacy depends on it) will achieve a greater measure, ultimately to their countries' economic benefit.

Arguably, however, there are many sorts of "good" education around the world, and national cultures define that "good" within each national context. What is revered in one culture is not necessarily valued in another. Moreover, the rules of culture are generally seen as redundant within a speech community, and therefore need never be mentioned (LeVine, 1984), leaving the locally defined "good" sitting quietly at the mercy of the globally defined "best." Might the rising international comparative testing establishment be polarizing our intrinsically diverse educational values into a single, vertical direction, with higher scores as a "proxy for educational quality" (UNESCO, 2005) and lower scores, implicitly, an indicator of ostensible problems within a given system?

This could plausibly become insidiously disruptive if it leads to imposing globalized cultural values on diverse societies. Moreover, this sort of market-economy thinking is oblivious to the cultural meanings of school. In developing countries such as Benin, for example, globally driven reforms have ignored local meanings of the teaching profession, leading to cultural imposition with unintended consequences, such as alienation of education's most important ally, the teachers. Welmond (2003) argues that decentralization agendas of international assistance agencies impose a foreign value system on this indigenous society. Divorced from traditional paradigms of good teaching, teachers now resent being called "budgetavores" and depicted as a fiscal liability.

It is tempting to surmise that cultural imposition is problematic only in economically weak societies. However, this developing-versus-advanced-country dichotomy is but another stanza of the same Keynesian hymn. That is, it forces us to conclude that globally accepted education reforms (guided now by international comparison tests) work best in countries at a given economic level. If, on the other hand, we were to view culture as separate from socioeconomics (and thus worthy of safeguarding from blatantly economics-driven discourse), we would expect the advanced world to render mismatches between global reforms and local education systems in similar fashion to the developing world.

In this essay, I employ a cultural analysis to examine schooling in Japan, a highly developed country. I argue that some of the basic meanings of Japanese mass schooling are irrelevant to international achievement tests. Reviewing the narrative of a workshop given for educators from the US, another highly developed society, about the culture of schooling in Japan, I reflect on cultural aspects of compulsory schooling in Japan invisible to cultural outsiders. I then consider implications of cultural meanings for the validity of current

reform movements in Japan, which are increasingly driven by international comparison.

In a two-day IERS-sponsored workshop held in July 2004, I discussed the culture of Japanese education with schoolteachers, researchers and education administrators from Vermont, USA (13 participants).[1] The discussion focused primarily on understanding the local meanings of Japanese education. I lectured to the group based on my experience as an educator, researcher and parental consumer of Japanese public education, and on our common experience in American public schools, making an effort to address aspects of Japanese schooling often raised by American researchers and American educators in Japanese schools. Participants gave comments and questions from their perspectives. This workshop was audio recorded and transcribed, including my lecture and the discussion that followed. I reviewed the transcript, looking for aspects of Japanese schooling that seemed salient from an American perspective and categorizing these aspects into thematic groups. The session was 90 minutes long and was held on the first of the two-day workshop after the group had visited a local Japanese middle school and spoken with teachers and administrators there.

Aspects of Japanese Education that were Addressed

The topics discussed in the workshop included: family involvement in education, the meanings of groups, socialization into the *uchi*, responsibility for articles of learning, and the curriculum in public schools versus the cram school establishment. We also touched on current reform issues. I will take up each of these topics here.

Permissiveness and Achievement Motivation

Although Japanese society is notably supportive

of education and achievement, Japanese childrearing practices have been viewed as permissive by Western observers since the Meiji Era (Benedict, 1946). More recently, preschool and primary school observers from the West have described *amae* (Doi, 1973) and the ever-benevolent role maintained by Japan's schoolteachers (White, 1987; Tobin et al, 1989; Peak, 1991). Numerous researchers have commented on the role of teaching *omoiyari* or "empathy" in Japan (e.g. White, 1987; Lewis, 1995), and how teachers even refrain from intervening in conflicts between children, preferring rather to allow children to exercise their own initiative in addressing relational problems (Tobin et al, 1989).

In contrast, Tsuneyoshi (2001) has pointed out the more authoritarian American model in which adults generally assume more control. Certainly American attitudes toward children have changed over the past century from notions such as "children should be seen and not heard" to the much more child-centered 1990s of soccer moms and "involved fathers" (Summers et al, 1999). Nevertheless, whether American adults believe in spanking, time-outs or "boundaries" (Cloud & Townsend, 2002), the unchanging theme in childrearing in the US is that children should experience the consequences of their own behavior. This contrasts with how Japanese adults working with children tend to rely on "empathy" for motivating desired behaviors – that is, the consequences *others* will experience as a result of the child's behavior. Viewed from either side of the Pacific, then, the Japanese model of childrearing and schooling appears comparatively permissive, supportive of children, and allows generous space for children to direct their own affairs.

In this permissive, supportive childrearing context, there is also a strong push toward

achievement from early on in childhood. Although Japanese preschool curriculums generally do not incorporate the teaching of writing, it is clear that families vigorously and strategically expose children to print. A visit to the *kiosk* at a local train station or to the children's section of the bookstore will render ample evidence of this. *Gakushu zasshi* (learning magazines) are published for children of specific ages from age 3 to grade 6. Filled with colorful pictures and comics, they encourage young children to read about their favorite characters. Foreign characters, such as Harry Potter, Pokémon and Thomas the Tank Engine afford plentiful opportunity for children to learn *katakana* (the script for foreign loan words) in addition to *hiragana* (the script for Japanese words) from an early age. Inserted into these magazines are cardboard in-folds of craft projects with explicit instructions how to fold the paper across lines (in the *origami* tradition) to form cute objects, such as a dinosaur or a little chest of drawers. Other in-folds include perforated *kanji* flash cards or arithmetic flashcards, as well as learning games with dice or other game objects included in a plastic pouch. As the age level rises, the variety proliferates to include science, social studies and other types of learning magazines. The sheer abundance of these magazines testifies to the premium Japanese families place on literacy and numeracy acquisition.

Socialization into Groups

When a Japanese child enrolls in preschool or school, the role of group involvement increases. Lewis (1995) discusses the *han* or "working groups" of 4 to 8 children in Japanese classrooms as the location for nearly all of a child's learning activities in school. She notes that Japanese teachers tend to keep *han* structures intact for longer periods of time than American teachers keep "working groups," facilitating deeper levels of

cooperative engagement among students. Classroom *hans* assume numerous responsibilities together, such as cleaning specified areas of school grounds and taking turns with other *hans* to serve each other lunch, etc. Because each *han*'s tasks bear real-life consequences (e.g. serving lunch requires determining the amount of food each student is given), and teachers tend to refrain from mediation, students are given many opportunities to practice negotiation skills through the activities of the *han*. Sato (1996) argues the development of *individual* strengths happens in relational contexts of the *han*. Within *hans*, individual roles are determined, including leader, sub-leader, and specific monitor tasks. Japanese teachers allow extensive self-management on the part of *hans* (Lewis, 1995), and this lays the foundation for the consensus-oriented teaching styles observed in Japanese classrooms (Stevenson & Stigler, 1992).

The homeroom, or *kumi*, is another important organizational unit within the school, and it remains intact throughout the day, and throughout the year. Morals class is frequently used for conflict resolution within the *kumi*, and students discuss classroom management issues in homeroom period every day. Some teachers employ methods of light competition between *kumis*, and give cooperative tasks to the *kumi*, such as reading through a passage in the English textbook, one sentence per student, and timing the whole *kumi* to compete with other *kumis*.

Another grouping found in many schools throughout Japan is the commuting groups that travel from students' neighborhoods to the school every morning. These are typically organized by the school, which takes responsibility for students from the front doors of their home. Like classroom *hans*, these commuting groups also have leaders, who may be the eldest student of the group. This leader is responsible to make sure all the members have arrived at the meeting place at the given time

and that they walk in order toward the school.

Mandatory club involvement comprises another sort of grouping. The Japanese course of study incorporates club activities as part of the "special curricular program" (TIERA, 1998), and these clubs are typically self-managed usually without an adult present. Whereas in the US, clubs and athletic activities after school are often seen as ways of keeping young people "out of trouble," in Japan, they are seen as a place for students to belong (White, 1994). Recently, some schools are moving to make club involvement optional or to start a *kitakubu*, or "going home club." Nevertheless, student relationships within clubs still comprise a large part of Japanese school life, and they are taken up in Japanese *anime* dramas that depict the hierarchic relationships between older and younger students.

As the purpose of these many groupings is in large part to give individual students a strong sense of belonging, a student's identification with his or her group is a crucial aspect. Groups act in concert, and they are often evaluated together. Hence, individuals spend much of their energy working for the advancement of their group, rather than only their individual evaluations. The group forms a sort of "home base" for the individual (Lewis, 1995), and this can be understood in terms of the *uchi / soto* (in-group / outside world) dichotomy. Both have a place in the life of a child, but the grouping that occurs at public schools work to establish *uchi* relationships for the child. Within these in-groups children are taught to work empathically for the harmony of the group. Outsmarting one's group members is not a valued skill. Rather, working collaboratively, group members come to understand each other's strengths and weaknesses, and depend upon each other accordingly. Overtly excelling above the performance of other members is considered off-color.

The annual *undokai*, or track-and-field day, is an example of ways in which individuals are each given a niche within the collective. Unlike many schools in the US where participation in special events (such as a talent show or track and field events) are voluntary, Japanese schools require all students to participate in events, and most events are not voluntary. At a middle school track and field day I observed, students in charge of an obstacle course event intentionally slowed down the best athletes when they had to crawl under a netting structure. This way, every student can be expected to participate in all-school events without calling attention to the strengths of some and the weaknesses of others.

While grouping is a large part of the school experience in Japan, each individual is held equally responsible for following many routines. Each student carries a uniform leather bag (*randoseru*) during elementary school and a canvas bag during junior high school. In the bag, each student must arrange his or her needed textbooks for the day. Students are required to bring handkerchief-sized place mats to use at lunch, and, depending on the school district, his or her own chopsticks. Elementary students must keep track of their *pianika* (wind-keyboards) for music class, paint sets for art class, calligraphy sets for *kanji* penmanship and an array of other items.

To ensure students remember these responsibilities, students are given a card of their weekly class schedule that they are to post somewhere visible in their homes. At the end of each school day, teachers write down students' assignments for the next day, which they are expected to transcribe into their *renraku-cho* (communiqué notebooks). The child is expected to bring the *renraku-cho* home to be read by the child's parent. Parents are encouraged to write messages to the teacher in this notebook, and likewise, teachers write messages to parents in

them. When a child forgets to bring a textbook or a particular item to class, this is often reported to the class by a peer acting as *wasuremono-gakari* (forgotten items monitor), and this process serves as a motivation to children to remember and take responsibility for their articles of learning. Michele Hernadez (2000) argues that one of the most important skills a middle school student can learn is the skill of organizing and taking responsibility for their own studies. These skills are generally not taught in American classrooms, she avers. Clearly, however, there is considerable attention given to organization tasks in the Japanese school regimen. Importantly, these routines are enforced through the working of groups and group identities.

Socialization into groups in Japanese schools, then, is a ubiquitous and powerful means of inculcating values and teaching children the processes of learning. The individual's relationship to the group is one of intense identification without the loss of individual responsibility. The individual is responsible to the collective and from the collective draws affirmation for his or her contributions. This affirmation is not with reference to other individuals, because "the nail that protrudes gets hammered." Harmony is crucial for group functioning, and the group psychologically punishes individuals who over-assert their individuality. Conversely, the individual's efforts earn him or her the acceptance of other members of the many group configurations.

Japanese group formation has been credited with Japan's economic success during the period of rapid industrialization and blamed for economic failure in the information age. Regardless of the validity of these claims, however, group formation in Japan is integrally related to cultural notions of individuals and groups. Lebra (1976) and Kondo (1990) have discussed *uchi / soto* dynamics in Japanese society at large. Nakane (1970) elucidated

relationships between social structures and consensus formation. The Japanese school group, therefore, was not invented to serve the economy. Rather, it is cultural modality that integral within Japanese society, and it continues to serve many important societal functions.

The Cram School Establishment

At 6:40 p.m. on a weekday evening a mother rushed into a well-known *juku* (test preparation school) near a suburban train station in Tokyo, carrying a designer paper bag containing a nicely made supper for her upper elementary school child. Math class, which started at 4:45, was to end in 5 minutes, at 6:45. After placing the item on the counter next to a group of other designer paper bags containing suppers for other students, she disappeared out the door of the *juku* reception room where I was sitting. When the bell rang, out marched a band of sighing students, presumably happy to briefly leave their hard, narrow benches and desks and to see the parcels their mothers had presumably prepared for them to consume before their 7 o'clock class was to begin.

Unlike the cooperative group atmosphere of public schools, Japan's *juku* industry provides students a place where they can focus and excel without hesitation beyond the levels of their peers in public school. Students I have interviewed at *juku*s and observed in classes have generally seemed to be enjoying themselves (Langager, 2001). Students sometimes banter with each other and with their teachers, but they do not generally struggle to maintain group harmony per se. Little energy is expended establishing group identities at *juku*. Rather, students work to serve their individual interests in academic advancement. One *juku* teacher I interviewed in Saitama Prefecture told me, "Students enjoy coming here, because we allow them to achieve. At their public schools they are required to stay at the pace of their peers within

their *kumi* and *han*."

The *juku* industry in Japan falls into two subgroups: *gakushu juku* (learning *juku*s) and *shingaku juku* (advancement *juku*s). The former seeks to boost students' basic literacy skills, especially during the elementary school years, whereas the latter is a test preparation service for students preparing to test into private and elite schools at the next level. *Juku* attendance proliferates at several junctures throughout childhood. First, in upper elementary school, when public after-school daycare centers (*gakudo hoiku*) are no longer available to children, and when many urban children prepare to test into elite junior high schools. The second juncture is during middle school, when students prepare to test into elite high schools, and the third is in high school when students prepare for university entrance exams. Additionally, there are *yobiko*s, or full-day test preparation schools for students preparing to test into university after a year's study.

Although rumors often spread among families at a given public school regarding whose child is attending which *juku*, it is essentially irrelevant to the life of the school. Public school teachers may or may not consider students' need to arrive at *juku* on time (e.g. when school activities go overtime, etc.), and in some schools and neighborhoods mothers in PTAs sometimes hide the fact that their children attend *juku*, partly to prevent embarrassment should their child fail to pass the entrance examination for the school of their choice. The avoidance of *juku*-talk within public schools may be part of maintaining harmony within school groups, which assume the prime foci of children's identification. That is, fellow members of a *han* or *kumi* have no reason to bring up their *juku* attendance, as it is irrelevant to the cooperative purposes for which they attend school.

As private institutions, *juku*s are free to develop their own teaching styles. They closely follow the Education Ministry's Course of Study, but they also obtain information about what learning points are given greater priority by the Ministry. Moreover, they maintain historical databases of test questions on entrance exams to various elite middle schools, high schools and universities, and they base their curricula on these. Top ranking students' names are published nation-wide within a given *juku* franchise.

The accomplishments of *juku*s cannot be denied. Recently the Ministry of Education officially acknowledged the importance of learning *juku*s, although it has never recognized advancement *juku*s or *yobiko*s. Nevertheless, *juku*s have been the prime beneficiary of recent Ministry reforms, including the 5-day school week, which led more students to attend *juku*s for longer hours when Saturday was dropped from the public school week. Some *juku*s taut the requests they receive from public schools to dispatch teachers for pedagogical workshops contributing to the professional development of public school teachers.

International achievement test results are typically reported to infer the relative achievement of public school systems, and the private test preparation industry remains generally incognito within the comparative education discourse. As a result, public schools are usually given the credit or blame both for what they achieve and for what *juku*s achieve outside of the international public eye. We must keep *juku*s in mind, however, when considering the educational milieu.

Education Reform Issues

In the past two decades, major reforms have been vigorously proposed in Japan, based on severe criticism of the education system and on high-profile media events. Education researchers (e.g. Yoneyama, 1999) have focused on specific, heinous incidents, such as the child murders within schools, to infer pathological problems in the

system at large and argue for dramatic changes. Many of these changes, however, have adopted a globalized neoliberal discourse for education reforms based on market principles. Hidenori Fujita (2000) has criticized these movements on three points: they seek to abolish positive aspects of the education system together with the bad, they hold no particular promise of resolving the problems they are intended to address, and they invite a divisive sort of elitism. It is difficult to tell where the current reforms will lead, but the Japanese public is clearly sensitive to Japan's achievement level in international comparison.

Discussion

When discussing Japan's education system with educators from the U.S., numerous aspects of the culture of schooling required explaining. These included issues of childrearing practices, socialization into groups and the implications for individual-group relations for the sorts of achievement facilitated by public schools versus the cram school establishment.

In Japan, public schools certainly exist to teach students facts, concepts and skills. So do *jukus*, but their emphasis is on measurable test-oriented knowledge, while public schools attempt to focus on group socialization and cooperative learning. This differs from the American context in which the "learning center" and "test preparation" industry is young, compared to its Japanese counterpart, but high-stakes testing is emerging throughout the public school systems – a sort of individualist full-participation policy.

Japan has traditionally ranked at the top of international achievement scores, and the public is used this. Recent tests, however, are producing new winners, and Japan now has to face a decline in achievement relative to the rest of the world (Honkawa Data Tribune, 2004). International

comparative tests perhaps mistakenly give public education credit for Japan's high achievement scores, as comparison tests implicitly ignore the impact of institutions like *jukus* (not to mention the cultural milieu). Accordingly, reforms currently proposed for the education system assume schools to be something that they are perhaps not – institutions that exist to raise students' measured achievement scores per se, a role that Japanese has relegated to *jukus*. The implications are serious, because it means that by trying to set Japan to an international comparative standard, we run the risk of neglecting the uniquely Japanese meanings of schooling within current reform movements. Already there is talk of decreasing the large class size, traditionally viewed as positive (Stevenson & Stigler, 1992). This all may result in subjecting Japanese schooling to an international Keynesian regime, ultimately endangering the many traditions of group cohesion that provide niches for individual students

Because these international comparative tests do not measure levels of empathy, individuals' responsibility for the articles of their learning, the health of group functioning, and other educational goals defined locally by Japanese culture, they are incapable of appraising Japanese schools for being the institutions that Japanese people have always valued. Yet, international comparative tests are political gold. The higher a nation ranks, the more political capital its leaders enjoy.

If what was always valued in schooling in Japan is vulnerable to the global sweep of international comparative testing, together with market-oriented means of competing in that global contest, this means that globalization of education poses a danger not only for developing countries, but for an advanced country as well. Accordingly, what is at stake in all education systems is not simply an economic issue but the very soul of what we have come to know of as "school."

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1 ICU-University of Vermont Summer Workshop "Education and the State: A Comparative Look at Japan and the US."

2 *Amae* is a folk psychology term that Doi Takeo, in his book *The Anatomy of Dependence*, introduced into international psychological circles. A rough English translation would be, "indulgent love."