

Title	Harnessing : western educational freedom and Japanese perspective
Sub Title	
Author	Phillips, Wayne I.
Publisher	慶應義塾大学日吉紀要刊行委員会
Publication year	2001
Jtitle	慶應義塾大学日吉紀要. 英語英米文学 No.38 (2001. 3) ,p.89- 132
JaLC DOI	
Abstract	How people regard their place in the world, coupled with the emphasis they give to the learning process, plays a direct role in the development of intellectual growth. Does education have limitations? If so, who enforces them? And what does learning to think actually mean? These are several questions which are being asked by governmental organizations in the West and Japan.
Notes	
Genre	Departmental Bulletin Paper
URL	https://koara.lib.keio.ac.jp/xoonips/modules/xoonips/detail.php?koara_id=AN10030060-20010331-0089

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Harnessing Educational Freedom

—A Western and Japanese Perspective—

Wayne I. Phillips

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ABSTRACT : How people regard their place in the world, coupled with the emphasis they give to the learning process, plays a direct role in the development of intellectual growth. Does education have limitations? If so, who enforces them? And what does learning to think actually mean? These are several questions which are being asked by governmental organizations in the West and Japan.

INTRODUCTION

What is it that separates Western from Japanese thought? One factor could be the way in which people regard their philosophy of life. Throughout history, from the time of Socrates to our modern age, the human race has sought answers to the fundamental questions of life: Who are we and why are we here?¹ Following is what Shin-ichi Terashima, a teacher at the School of Medicine at Ryukyu University had to say on the subject:

Western philosophy views the passage of time as a dynamic process:

The past leads up to the present, which, in turn, points forward to the future. In this seamless continuum, the three component elements exercise a cumulative effect: The past shapes the present, and the past and present both shape the future. For the Japanese, however, there is no such broad spectrum where time is concerned. The present is all that matters.

For the Western mind, reality spans the three dimensions of time. But for the Japanese, reality is what exists in the present, not what has happened in the past or may happen in the future. Western philosophy delves into the nature of reality across time, but for the Japanese, life as it exists at the present moment in time is the definition of reality.

When a member of a Western society acts in an unacceptable manner, the response of his peers and leaders is: So-and-so did this (past tense). He must be prevented from doing so again (future tense). In an analogous situation, the response of the Japanese and their leaders is limited to the present tense: "I am sorry to see So-and-so do this."

According to Japanese thinking, there are two kinds of things in the world: "honto" (real or true) and "uso" (unreal or false). Things in the present are real because they are objective and scientific; those in the past and future are unreal because they are subjective and imaginary. Correspondingly, one's life, too, should be firmly grounded in the present. One should be constantly on guard to maintain homogeneity with regard to the group, staying neither too far behind the times nor too far ahead of them. People are expected to be unanimous in their perception of accepted reality, namely, the present.

In Japan, ideas and opinions are considered illogical because they are independent of things as they are, i.e. the present. Individual creativity

can hardly be expected to flourish in an environment where expressing one's views, particularly critical ones, is tantamount to antisocial behavior.²

Everybody has an "inner" time that differs from one person to the next. One day or one year seems long or short depending on the person and also the occasion. What the difference between these two times signifies or what significance one gives it perhaps determines the life of each individual.³

Can the present, the here and now, be all-encompassing? Japanese thought patterns have of late shifted from an "analog" mode to a "digital" one. On an analog clock, for instance, one can see at a glance that 12 o'clock is preceded by 11 o'clock and followed by 1 o'clock. There is a linear progression from the past to the present and then into the future. With digital watches, however, only the time of that particular moment can be seen. There is nothing to suggest a continuous progression of time.⁴

The concept of time is not easy to pin down for the Japanese. Let's consider it on a psychological plane. The classical Rorschach test was invented by a Swiss psychiatrist a century ago. It involves interpreting an individual's personality on the basis of what he or she sees in a series of randomly shaped ink blots. The Hiroshima Rorschach test, however, is more complicated. In the psychiatrist's office, the ink-blot images are confined to the dimensions of sheets of paper and do not change over time. But the perceived meanings of Hiroshima have no fixed boundaries in time or place.⁵

The philosophical construct of time is a perplexing matter. To regard the past, present, and future equally seems fair, but it takes a logical and rational mind to think in this way. Artificial intelligence is one

thing, but humankind is quite another. Humankind, after all, is comprised of a collective group of emotional beings who are influenced chiefly by experiences. It is the degree to which these experiences are judged by "significant others" that differentiates the values placed on time in any given society. As L.P. Hartley once said, "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there."⁶

OBSERVATIONS

Jim McRae is a leader among the growing number of accredited therapists in Japan helping people work out troubles exacerbated by the difficulty of life abroad. He has a private practice in clinical psychology in Tokyo. Following are his thoughts on why foreigners come to Japan:

People come to Japan for diverse reasons, and make their lives in response accordingly. Some come to avoid social contact, ending up far lonelier than they ever imagined or hoped for. Others enjoy the status of the Japanese student-foreign teacher relationship: in Japan they are "sensei." This can make leaving a nearly impossible decision.

"Many foreigners arrive with a purpose: to study martial arts, do business, travel. They come, they find what they are looking for, and leave. Others, seeking to escape abuse, violence, unpleasantness, smothering, find Japan so comfortable and liberating they dare not move on."⁷

"Phenomenological" is the word one scholar has used to describe Japan. The Japanese are said to like to focus on what they see before them, with little interest in background or consequences.⁸ Scholars have put forward many different theories concerning the ways of thinking of the Japanese, but most agree in the long run that, compared

with thought in the West, it is not logical but intuitive.⁹

Dr. Takeshi Yoro has a column in the weekly *Shukan Bunshun*. In one commentary he wrote, “The innate Japanese tendency toward seriousness has advanced since the end of World War II because the nation came to value safety and peace more than anything else.” The Japanese, he went on, hold a cautious attitude in order to avoid danger. However, “if they happen to meet danger by chance, the result is that they don’t know how to cope with it.”

“One out of 100 people is schizophrenic. Since we cannot isolate all of society’s mentally ill members, what should we do? The best way to deal with such people is to act calmly and not cause them to panic. The problem is most people are not aware of this and have no training.”¹⁰

Researchers at the Mayo Clinic, reporting on a study that spanned three decades, said they found that optimistic people live about 19 percent longer than pessimists. “It confirmed our common-sense belief,” said Toshihiko Maruta, a psychiatrist who was the lead researcher in the project. “It tells us that mind and body are linked, and that attitude has an impact on the final outcome—death.”

The report, published in the February issue of the *Mayo Clinic Proceedings*, did not try to explain why a positive attitude is equated with longevity. It said optimists may be less likely to develop depression and helplessness, or they might be more positive in seeking medical help and taking care of themselves, with less fatalistic thinking about their health.¹¹

Dozens of recent studies show that optimists do better than pessimists in work, school and sports, suffer less depression, achieve more goals, respond better to stress, wage more effective battles against disease and, yes, live longer.¹²

The easiest means of identifying people is by their face. Philosophy professor Kenji Tsuchiya of Ochanomizu Women's University wrote: "In 94 percent of all cases, people judge others by how they look."¹³ To look great means to feel great. Alleviate stress, and the signs of a healthy (wrinkle-free) youthful appearance will prevail.

Smiling is also seen as a key to the economy. Make people laugh—that should make the economy better and lead to a bright future for Japan, according to Masao Kimura, board director of the Osaka-based major entertainment firm Yoshimoto Kogyo Co.

"Japan, by any standard, is a rich and safe country," he said. "But Japanese people just don't look happy, and I often wonder what they have to complain about. They're not laughing enough."¹⁴

How are the mature, adult Japanese spending their time? They are likely to skip breakfast, spend more than an hour commuting to work, sleep less than five hours and barely exchange a word with their spouse.

True to their reputations as workaholics, Japanese in and around Tokyo tend to live hectic, busy lives with little free time, according to a survey by a major watchmaker.

The survey of 368 people was carried out by Citizen Watch Co. to update a similar study done 25 years ago. The survey tried to find out how people's lives differed from their ideals.

Most wanted to spend 20 minutes eating breakfast, for example, but only 17 percent of the respondents were able to do so.

Forty-one percent said they finished their breakfast in 10 minutes, while 23 percent gulped it down in five minutes. Fourteen percent skipped it entirely.¹⁵

What is the much sought after purpose of our existence? Some people believe that the meaning of life is to be happy. A problem arises,

however, when the term “happiness” is defined. The reason for this is that there are as many definitions for happiness as there are people.

If we can agree that happy people are those who are free from pain and suffering, over a third of the Japanese cannot be happy. More than one in three Japanese suffers from chronic fatigue, according to a survey by the Ministry of Health and Welfare.

The survey, conducted in July and August of 1999, covered 3,015 people between the ages of 15 and 65. The results indicate that 59 percent of the respondents acknowledged feeling tired or sluggish, while 36 percent said their fatigue had persisted for at least six months.

“I am surprised at the extremely large number of people complaining of fatigue,” said Teruo Kitani, head of the ministry’s research team. “Japanese people apparently show high levels of fatigue compared with respondents in similar studies from abroad.”¹⁶

Children are tired, too, due to spending much time at “juku” (cram schools) or taking piano and calligraphy lessons. Forty-six percent of elementary school students said they do not feel any appetite in the morning, while 44 percent said they easily get tired or just feel like frolicking around, according to a survey conducted by the Rengo Research Institute for Advancement of Living Standard.¹⁷

Japanese children and teenagers get too little exercise, spend some three hours a day in front of the television set and with video games, get too little sleep and have unhealthy eating habits, according to a survey.¹⁸

Happiness is a fleeting thing. In order to escape from the social pressures of daily life, it has long been known that some Japanese men seek women to relieve their anxiety. Yayori Matsui, author of “Women in the New Asia,” poses the question: “Why do so many women end up

as sex commodities in Japan?” According to Matsui, this is a result of both the legacy of the licensed prostitute system of feudal Japan and “... the existence of a huge number of company warriors who are exhausted by severe competition and in search of comfort.”¹⁹

In America, there is a growing trend to break the contract of marriage in the hope that the chances for happiness will be increased. Americans are less likely to marry than ever before, according to a new study, and fewer people who do marry report being “very happy” in their marriages.

The report, by Rutgers’s University’s National Marriage Project was touted as a benchmark compilation of statistics and surveys. It was found that the nation’s marriage rate has dipped by 43 percent in the past four decades, leaving it at its lowest point in recorded history.

This historically low marriage rate, coupled with soaring divorce rates, has dramatically altered attitudes toward one of society’s most fundamental institutions. While Americans still cherish the ideal of marriage, increasing numbers of young adults, particularly young women, are pessimistic about finding a lasting marriage partner and are far more accepting than in the past of alternatives to marriage, including single parenthood and living together with a partner outside of marriage, according to the report. As a result, nearly half of American marriages are projected to end in divorce or permanent separation.

It is noteworthy that while 90 percent of women born between 1933 and 1942 were either virgins when they married or had premarital sex only with their eventual husbands, now over half of teenage girls have sexual intercourse by age 17, and on average they are sexually active for seven to eight years before getting married.²⁰

A new Florida state law gives couples a marriage license discount if they take a marital education class. A couple in Florida who attends such a class can get \$32.50 off of an \$88.50 marriage license. Marital programs are in effect in about 10 states.²¹

Most Americans like to have their politics informed by morality and their morality informed by religion.²² Moral development is the process of internalizing society's rules and principles of right and wrong. In order to maintain a stable social order, the achievement of morality is necessary. Acquiring morals is a sequential progress linked to a person's stage of moral reasoning and cognitive understanding.²³

In Japan, on the other hand, although divorce is not as popular an alternative in seeking happiness as in America, there are what is known as "silent marriages". According to a Citizen Watch Co. survey, "silent marriages" seem to be on the rise.

Twenty-five years ago, no one said they didn't talk at all with their spouses. In the new study, however, one in 10 fell into that category. Those who spent more than two hours a day chatting with their spouses totaled just 6 percent. Twenty percent said they spent about 30 minutes on marital dialogue a day, while 31 percent spent 15 minutes.²⁴

The number of divorces among Japanese couples topped 200,000 for the first time in 1996, reaching 206,966, with the divorce rate standing at an all-time high of 1.66 per 1,000 people, the Health and Welfare Ministry said.

Ministry officials cited an increase in divorces among couples who have lived together for more than 20 years as a key factor behind the rise.

Divorces among such couples accounted for about 16 percent of the total in 1996, according to ministry statistics on demographic trends.

The ratio was about 12 percent in 1985 and 6 percent in 1975.

Divorces among Japanese couples have been on the rise since 1991, the year the bubble economy imploded, and has set new records every year, resuming a trend seen from 1971 through 1983.²⁵

Incidentally, a Japanese couple gets divorced every 130 seconds, reports the Nov. 15 issue of AERA.²⁶ Tokyo's birthrate (1.1 babies per woman) ensures a tremendous drop in the number of children in the next generation.²⁷

What is the effect employment has on marriage and how do married couples come to terms with retirement? These aspects of marital bliss were observed in America. Jungmeen Kim and Phyllis Moen, who studied 534 married men and women between the ages of 50 and 74, found that men who retired while their wives were still working showed a higher level of marital stress than newly retired men whose wives did not work.

The happiest men were the ones who found another job and whose wives were not working. "Those who are retired and re-employed report the highest morale and lowest depression," said Kim. Men who stay retired "experience the lowest morale and most depression."

Men who go back to work after they retire usually take a job because they want to, she said. When retired women rejoin the work force, "they usually have to do it for financial reasons."²⁸

Dr. Ross Stolzenberg, a sociologist at the University of Chicago and a researcher with the Alfred P. Sloan center for Working Families and Children, combed the data gathered from 2,867 husbands and wives and found that when the wife works more than 40 hours a week, her husband's chances of being in good or excellent health decline by more than 25 percent.

“Her paid work has substantial negative effects on changes in her husband’s health,” Stolzenberg told attendees at a Washington conference.²⁹

It turns out that Venezuelans, who topped a survey in 1999 as the most vain people in the world, are also happiest by far about their sex lives.

A Roper Starch Worldwide survey found that 46 percent of Venezuelans were “very happy” with their sex lives followed by Brazilians at 32 percent and Americans at 27 percent.

“Culturally speaking, what we’re seeing for the most part is that countries with reputations for romance, passion, love and sex live up to their reputations in how they experience their sex lives, said Roper global research director Tom Mille.³⁰

The idea of eternal love among Italian couples takes a hammering in a survey carried out in the country in 1999.

The survey, compiled by the ANSA news agency, seems at first to show that men took a romantic view of marriage.

In the results of one survey, 65 percent of men said they believed in eternal love, while 92 percent of young husbands claimed to have married only for love.

On the other hand, 57 percent of men believed an extramarital fling during summer helped put the sparkle back in life. Summer is when Italian wives are traditionally packed off to the seaside with the children.

Italian women, however, were less starry-eyed: six wives out of 10 said they married because they feared loneliness and wanted to leave their parents’ home.

Five out of 10 women questioned in one survey said they would not

say no to a summer affair with a beach attendant—presumably while the husband is cheating at home. Seventy percent of men would cheat on their wives if it was just one night.

But while 50 percent of Italian women would forgive their husband a homosexual affair, 60 percent of men would force their wife out of the home if she had an affair with another woman.³¹

A survey, part of an Internet poll Time conducted for a feature about young Chinese for its October 23, 2000 issue, found that 37 percent said family is the most important thing in life. Love ranked last at 10 percent. About 5,000 people aged between 18 and 30 participated.³²

“Love and marriage. Love and marriage. Go together like a horse and carriage.” These are the lyrics to an outdated song which, seemingly, has lost its appeal amongst the realm of modern Western industrial societies. It used to be that couples got “hitched” and soon made plans to start a family. It was a rather quaint, puritanical historical period.

After spending 11 years analyzing thousands of questionnaires, Oxford professor Michael Argyle believes he has found out what makes people happy. Marriage was one of the most important guarantees of happiness, especially for men, and the least happy in society were those who are divorced or separated, his research found.³³

“John and Mary sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G. First comes love. Then comes marriage. Then comes junior in a baby carriage.” This limerick gained prominence in Western children’s folklore. And such a belief was basically all that need have been called for in order for young lovers to realize and share their happiness. But something has gone terribly wrong to spoil this picture.

Children are not receiving the love and attention they so rightfully deserve. Subsequently, the family as well as society suffer because of it.

Research by the Ministry of Education reveals that Japanese parents spend less time and energy on their children's social education than their counterparts do in Britain, Germany, the United States and South Korea.

The ministry's study attributes the unruly behavior of Japanese school students to a failure on the part of parents to teach their children proper social behavior, including the importance of telling the truth, not bullying the weak and listening to teachers.³⁴

More than half of school-children have breakfast alone or without the presence of adults, and only about a third eat supper with all of their family members.

An increasing number of children say they are not hungry before meals and they do not enjoy eating. They think the most enjoyable meal of the day is the school lunch. These are some of the findings of a 1999 survey on eating habits.³⁵

Is life worth living? More than one-third of elementary and junior high school students surveyed in a recent poll believe they "should never have been born," a municipal education research institute said.

Researchers are alarmed by the results of the poll, which they say suggests that even children who lead a relatively relaxed life in rural areas suffer from social stress and are losing confidence in themselves.

The survey was carried out by the research institute of the city of Morioka, the capital of Iwate Prefecture, which has a population of 230,000.³⁶

EDUCATION

According to the Education Ministry, the number of children at public elementary and junior high schools who were continuously

absent from school for more than 30 days reached a record high of 127,692 in fiscal 1998, up 21.1 percent from the previous year. This figure translates into one in 43 junior high students and one in 295 elementary school students. Students absent from school for more than 50 consecutive days at elementary and junior high schools also hit a record high at 106,666.³⁷

More than 130,000 elementary and junior high school students were truant for 30 or more school days during the 1999-2000 academic year, according to an Education Ministry survey. A total of 130,208 students missed school without permission between April 1999 and March 2000, up about 2,500, or 2 percent, from the previous academic year and the most since the statistics were first taken in the 1991-1992 year.³⁸

In America, on the other hand, a new study suggests the best teenage liars are often the most popular kids. The study appeared in the *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior*. Robert Feldman of the University of Massachusetts was the psychologist who did the research. It bolsters a widespread view among researchers that lying is a social skill that can help a person get along. Other researchers looking at adults have made similar findings, but this study was said to be the first to focus on teens.³⁹

The Education Ministry said that a survey conducted by a Japanese group led by Yoshinao Hirano, an associate professor at Shinshu University, shows that Japanese children are "less disciplined" than their counterparts in other countries and urged parents to recognize the importance of educating children at home.⁴⁰

The Japanese call it "classroom collapse," and see it as a grave threat to the country's education system—and an unnerving sign of unrest among the younger generation.

“This is a very serious problem,” said Yutaka Nabeshima, who is running an Education Ministry study of the phenomenon. “We haven’t figured out what the root is yet.”

Classroom collapse, which has risen to a public concern in just the past three years, mostly takes place in elementary schools, where packed classes of 40 students spend the whole day with a single teacher.

Kids horsing around in class might not seem outrageous to outsiders, but in Japan, where children are expected to behave with minimum supervision, the trend is deeply troubling.

Theories about causes abound, ranging from an outdated education system and boring teaching methods to permissive parents and widespread moral breakdown.

Ryoichi Kawakami, a teacher who has written a book on the trend, links the problem to declining respect for schools and teachers and a rising inability of today’s pampered children to work well in groups.

Many critics say the Education Ministry needs to give students more freedom to study what they want. Others say it’s time to crack down on troublemakers and tell parents to discipline their kids.

“It’s not just a problem of schools—it’s a problem of society as a whole,” Kawakami said. “We have to rethink what the school’s role in society should be.”⁴¹

Gakkyu hokai (classroom breakdown) first attracted media attention around 1996. Naoki Ogi, an education critic and former junior high school teacher, reported that one in six elementary schools in Tokyo faces classroom breakdown, quoting a survey of 1,388 elementary schools. Having visited hundreds of schools during the past seven years, he said he had seen for himself that classroom breakdown was not only widespread but complex in its causes.⁴²

An Education Ministry-sponsored research group, Kokusai Ijime Mondai Kenkyukai (international forum on bullying), collaborated with researchers in England and Norway to conduct a survey on bullying.

The recently released report of the results is surprising. Only 13.9 percent of Japanese children reported having experienced bullying, compared with 20.8 of Norwegian children and 39.2 percent of English children.

But the survey also showed that Japanese children suffered more consistent, long-term bullying compared to children in other countries. Results indicated that they are also more likely to bully in groups and for the perpetrators to be close friends.

Another disturbing trend was the fact that while children in other countries responded to bullying by trying to stop it, for example by seeking a teacher's assistance, Japanese children showed a tendency to avoid confronting the bullies. Moreover, Japan was the only nation in which this disturbing tendency increased with age. We must learn from the results of this report.⁴³ Now is the time for the Japanese to do in-depth soul-searching and concentrate on moral restructuring.⁴⁴

In reference to Japan's educational problems, such as bullying and truancy, British Education Minister Tessa Blackstone said Britain has similar problems and the government has set out an anti-bullying policy. It also sent out a guidance pack to schools on various ways to handle bullying.

"Above all, (bullying) requires immediate and quick intervention by schools before it develops to an unacceptable level," Blackstone said.⁴⁵

Bullying in Japan is not restricted to secondary schools. It is a tolerated practice in the workplace as well. Dr. Keizo Takagi, 44, a

psychiatrist in Osaka, says managers know that bullying is unethical, but don't know of any other way to get workers to resign, given the constraints of the lifetime employment system.

Many decisions in Japan are made using "chinmoku no kotoba", a silent language rather than explicit discussion, he notes. But this tradition, while grimly effective, may not be tolerated much longer, Takagi believes.

"Now Japan is in a state of chaos while trying to digest Western culture and restructuring of companies," Takagi said. "The two cultures are clashing, but I am optimistic we will solve these problems."⁴⁶

Parents in Japan these days are abdicating a considerable amount of their responsibility and authority; ironically, the schools are partly to blame. They have assumed, and presumed, so much authority, that many parents, already suffering a lack of confidence to parent, now find it convenient to look the other way rather than confront what may be the unsavory realities of a wayward teenager's life.⁴⁷ It is the parents' responsibility to make sure their children are doing fine and to maintain communication.⁴⁸

In today's society, families are having fewer children, fathers are working more and mothers are clinging to their children with greater intensity, hampering children's growth, according to psychologist Yoshiomi Takahashi.

The shrinking nuclear family is giving rise to what Takahashi calls the "mother-child capsule" phenomenon, in which mothers become all accepting of their children and tend to be overprotective or intervene too much in their lives.

"Struggles with parents are part of a child's growing up, but in that kind of situation, mothers are stealing that opportunity from them," he

said.

Absent fathers, of course, don't help. This intense focus of women on their children is also due in part to the fact that their husbands are rarely at home. Takahashi said this type of unhealthy parent-child relationship is one factor, along with many others, behind the recent rise in juvenile delinquency.⁴⁹

Culture in its simplest but broadest sense is the way of life of individuals living in a group or a society. The daytime activities of all individuals, including children, are affected by each other's actions and by their environment. Control over the physical environment can be achieved to some extent by scientific and technological innovation. However, control over the psyche of individuals and groups remains a challenge. Freedom is demanded by modern society, and this has a crucial effect on child rearing.

Traditionally, the rearing of children in Japan was conducted by mothers or female members of the family and by grandparents. In postwar Japan, industrialization and economic development have brought about a change in child rearing practices. This is primarily due to the working hours of parents and the introduction of child-care facilities.⁵⁰

The Japanese have more (not less) in common with peoples of other nations, but like anyone, anywhere, there are certain idiosyncrasies to contend with—none of which are overwhelming in nature.

The Japanese continue to place the same value on education and on working for the good and honor of the family.⁵¹

School districts around the United States are banning trench coats and even considering student uniforms to keep youngsters from smuggling weapons and to bust up cliques and create more conformity in the

wake of the Columbine High massacre.

President Bill Clinton has said that school uniforms or a “nonprovocative-dress” rule could address “this whole black trench coat deal.”⁵²

An Australian mall has turned to Bing Crosby to scare away loitering teenagers from its entrances, according to a report.

The Warrawong Westfield mall in Wollongong, south of Sidney, has begun playing Crosby’s hit “My Heart is Taking Lessons” repeatedly to keep its entrances teenager-free, *The Daily Telegraph* said.

The tactic appears to be working. Teens have said the “old fogey” music had driven them from their favorite spot outside the complex.

“All the people from Warrawong High used to hang here after school —now you don’t see them,” 14-year-old Matthew Wilson told the daily.

The community is also considering installing pink lighting that clearly shows pimples on teenagers’ faces to discourage loitering.⁵³

The Education Ministry set up a research council to seek ways to encourage cooperation between kindergarten and elementary school teachers to combat so-called classroom collapse.

“Classroom collapse” refers to situations in which a teacher loses control over students, who may ignore instructions, talk among themselves or walk about the classroom. It has become more common in recent years, causing some teachers to have nervous breakdowns.

Conformity and the “ijime” problem are in tandem with one another. The “ijime” problem has no simple answer. Not only are the bully and victim much a part of the situation but family, friends and others are as well. One solution to bullying lies in understanding how each of the participants function in giving rise to the dilemma.⁵⁴

Disruptive students are found to lack self-awareness, are unable to

manage stress or control impulses, are poor communicators and are bad at making decisions.⁵⁵

During 1998, 1,707 teachers at public grade schools were reportedly laid off because of mental illness. One would presume the number is higher now. Other studies indicate that as many as one in five teachers has completely lost control of his/her classes.⁵⁶

One of the pressures teachers are facing is that most of them are unable to use PCs in class. Three-quarters of Japan's public school teachers are not able to hold classes using computers, according to an Education Ministry survey. Part of the reason may be that two out of five teachers do not even know how to use a computer, according to the survey.

The ministry has made computer education a priority in its new curriculum to be implemented in the 2002 academic year as it wants children to be better prepared to survive in an information-oriented society. But the study, conducted in March at 39,000 elementary, junior high and high schools nationwide, shows that although most teachers know how to use computers for simple tasks, their ability to use them in a classroom environment lags far behind.⁵⁷

B.F. Skinner, a psychologist who made use of behavioral methods in applied psychology, argued that the goals of education should be expressed in concrete behavioral terms, that educational programs should be carefully designed in a logical sequence which arranges successive approximations to the targets, that pupils should work individually and at their own pace in such a way that the successful completion of each step in a program might be followed by potentially reinforcing consequences such as confirmation of correctness. Before the introduction of today's computer-based educational technology, which often in fact

incorporates many of these principles, Skinner advocated the development of teaching programs which could be used in “teaching machines”. Although Skinner argued that this systematization of learning would release the teacher to monitor and improve the effectiveness of the steps of a program and to engage in personal interaction with the pupils as an educational manager rather than as a font of wisdom, the idea of teaching machines as the base of programmed learning appeared to some to be unduly restrictive and lacking in social context.⁵⁸

More public school students assaulted their teachers during the 1999 school year than in the previous year, according to an Education Ministry report. About 5,000 attacks on teachers were reported in 1999, up 11 percent.⁵⁹

The Education Ministry set up a research council after education experts postulated that the differing teaching methods at kindergartens and elementary schools as the cause of the phenomenon known as “classroom collapse”, ministry officials said.⁶⁰ Around the same time, it was suggested that teachers and other adults must take countermeasures at an early stage and deal with problems as a group to curb “classroom collapse,” according to an Education Ministry report.

The standard class size at public elementary schools is set at 40, which means two classes numbering less than 20 children must be merged. Team teaching, sending part-time teachers to assist homeroom teachers and utilizing school advisors from local education boards would be effective ways of helping teachers solve problems, an official said. Teachers need to change the view that they must “control” pupils. Children must be the main actors in the classroom and teachers should be the ones to support children in learning and solving problems by themselves, it says.⁶¹

The rigidity of Japanese schools is suffocating children and is one of the causes behind the recent rise in youth crime, according to education experts.

Naoki Ogi, an education critic who taught for 22 years until 1993 in junior high and high schools, believes teachers need to open up their minds and listen to children before trying to control them, otherwise bullying, truancy and other problems will never see a decline.⁶²

Of course the Japanese sincerely deplore the “ijime” problem, but its eradication would seem to require major structural changes in the educational system (in which the results of high-school and college entrance exams largely determine the rest of one’s life) and in Japanese society itself with its strong emphasis on consensus and conformity.⁶³

The upperclassmen in the middle school or junior high school are preparing for their high school entrance exams, meaning that all the teachers are busy preparing extra cram sessions. Therefore, bullying is often ignored by educators. The teachers have largely absolved themselves from responsibility.⁶⁴

How do some teachers deal with this problem? A record 1,609 public school teachers took off work in fiscal 1997 because of mental disorders, marking a 16 percent rise over the previous year, according to an Education Ministry survey.⁶⁵

The problem escapes easy explanation, but most experts think it is rooted in the extreme conformity demanded in public school, right down to the pencils and schoolbags of the children. Children who step out of line face merciless hazing, not only from students but also from teachers.⁶⁶

More than one-third of elementary school children who witnessed

bullying took no specific action and pretended not to see it, according to a survey by the Justice Ministry.⁶⁷

“The majority of junior high students confess that they don’t fully grasp what’s being taught at school. This shows that today’s children no longer fit in the existing school curriculum,” said Kajita, an education and psychology specialist.⁶⁸

According to a recent survey, an increasing number of elementary school pupils dislike mathematics. Experts consider the fact to be the primary factor behind “classroom collapse,” reports the survey. One opinion holds that students should not be forced to study subjects they dislike if their individuality is to be developed. However, individuality cannot be fostered if one lacks the basic skills necessary to function in society.

If mathematics is responsible for the collapse of classes, then teaching methods must be improved to make lessons enjoyable for students. For example, students could make different kinds of shapes out of cardboard during geometry class. Studying the works of Japanese mathematicians in the Edo Period might also pique children’s interests in mathematics.

Many students tend to fall behind in mathematics class because lessons proceed in a hierarchical order, progressing from simple to complex. Once a student fails to understand something, he or she will not be able to grasp subsequent lessons.

Patience is a skill required of all mathematics teachers. Teachers must make students who fall behind repeat the basics until they have mastered them. At the same time, the skills of talented children must be fully developed. Teaching in such a manner is a challenging task for any teacher.

Another survey shows that although Japanese elementary students rank fourth in mathematics in international comparisons, the percentage of Japanese students who dislike math is the second largest in the world. Yet another survey reveals that 30 percent of university students studying liberal arts cannot even calculate fractions at the elementary school level.⁶⁹

The Japanese entrance examination system is a competition which is thought to have helped precipitate many education-related problems. These include increasing juvenile delinquency, apathy on the part of students not targeted as high achievers, and school allergy, a phenomenon whereby some students are unable to attend school for emotional reasons.⁷⁰

According to an Education Ministry survey, the number of bullying cases reported by public primary, middle and high schools nationwide stood at 60,096 for fiscal 1995, breaking the 60,000 level for the first time since fiscal 1986.⁷¹

School is not a fun place to be.⁷² The very young are motivated by what is fun and what is novel and interesting, but older students are more pragmatic.⁷³ Children today are caught in a pivotal cultural clash between traditional, group-oriented Japanese values and growing individualism. A decade-long economic slump has nearly everyone questioning Japan's postwar system.⁷⁴

In January, 2000, students from The American School in Japan visited Tamagawa Gakuen as part of an exchange program. ASIJ students attended classes with their TG partners, students who are members of the "kokusai koryu" or international exchange club.

After their visit, the students commented on their experiences. "It was interesting since the way they think is much different from us,"

said Yuichi Kuroda. "Also, their sense of humor differed in some ways even though we were both Japanese." Natsume Saito said, "What I noticed was that the students are more social in class at ASIJ. At TG, students waited for teachers to call on them instead of raising their hands to speak for themselves."⁷⁵

Saori Tajima studied in an elite high school. She was on the fast track to entry at a top private university. She made the following observation: "More people are beginning to question or have a sense of dissatisfaction or distrust toward society and adults."⁷⁶

A recent poll showed that 64% of parents distrust teachers and 67% are unhappy with the education their children receive. One apparent reason is the worsening problem of bullying, which has led to at least 20 suicides among schoolchildren since May 1994.⁷⁷

REFORMS

Educational reforms should put priority on respecting a child's individuality and giving local authorities more autonomy to correct "excessive equalization," according to the 1999 White Paper on Education.

In the report, the Education Ministry said the system has concentrated too much on providing unified education, with schools "cramming knowledge" into children in a one-way manner.

This approach does not give children enough opportunities to develop individual abilities, has weakened moral education and is a factor behind the increase in bullying and truancy, the report says.

With various reforms now being introduced and continuing into 2002, the education system will provide a framework in which children will have more room to learn, think and act on their own.⁷⁸

Satono, a high school English teacher, is in her own words an indepen-

dent “active counselor.” Satono sees an urgent need to shift the focus of education from meeting the needs of society to those of the individual. A genuine “education of the heart” that draws out each student’s abilities and embraces a broader definition of a “good student” is what is needed, she says. Japan is still a nation that regards emotional and psychological disorders as taboo. The Japan Society of Certified Clinical Psychologists is the professional body for those in the field, whose members make up 90 percent of counselors hired by the Education Ministry.⁷⁹

An educated society would give its school-age children the time to think, dream and explore. An unwise one would build an infrastructure for success that would require children to absorb massive amounts of information.

Not having time to play and think pulverizes the mind and wilts the spirit. After many years of memorizing facts, all that is left is a shell of a person in a rut of tedious routine.⁸⁰

It has long been recognized that Japan’s educational system is badly in need of reform. Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori repeatedly makes it clear that he agrees. The indications are plentiful: the collapse of classroom discipline in elementary schools; the rising rates of prolonged absenteeism and physical violence, sometimes directed against teachers; bullying in junior and senior high schools and the rise in teenage crime; the lack of any serious interest in studying among many college and university students; and the stresses created by an extreme emphasis on test results and entrance examinations.⁸¹

Reforming the Japanese education system has been a political issue for decades. At present, politicians have belatedly begun to tackle this issue, making education a campaign issue. Yet, the campaign pledges of

politicians and debates among party leaders make it clear that discussions on the issue remain superficial. Politicians can debate the wisdom of revising the education law, but the true problem lies not in the letter of the law but in how our society raises its children.⁸² The problem is that too many politicians don't really know where to begin. And it has generally been true that quick-fix measures have been introduced to stave off the inevitable fundamental changes which must be made.

The traditional Japanese tendency is to find an "instant cure" for a difficult situation. Take the government's handling of the ailing economy, for example. Instead of taking the time and trouble to reform the economic structure itself, the ruling coalition parties have chosen quick-fix solutions such as pouring money into public works projects and those notorious "shopping coupons" of last year.⁸³

The quick-fix policy is aimed at solving problems in the here and now. And this strategy is what delays real progress. The Japanese, by their own admission, are situational, changing to adjust to the circumstances of the moment.⁸⁴ More often than not nature is what people make of it. Japanese behavior is guided by a situational rather than a principled morality. When contextual conditions change, one's behavior must be adjusted rather than constrained by irreversible rules. Such are the foundations of a highly controlled yet flexible society, characterized by a combination of seemingly benign and repressive aspects of social control.⁸⁵ As pointed out earlier, the Japanese don't regard the past or future as seriously as the present. As a result, meaningful change is slow to occur.

Ans Kobayashi is a trained clinical psychologist, and a counselor at the Aurora Counseling Center in Kudan-shita, central Tokyo. She said, "When people look to the future, they become afraid. Look how

Japanese turn to fortune-telling when they feel insecure. But there are better ways to take control, like taking a good hard look at all the options.”⁸⁶

It was at least fifteen years ago that the Japanese government insisted “on the internationalization of education, involving improvement of English classes, inviting more foreign students to Japanese universities and having dependents of Japanese businessmen who have worked abroad enter the main stream of society.”⁸⁷

Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori said that junior high and high school education should be unified into a one-step secondary education system and that the academic year at universities and colleges should start in September instead of April, in order to be in line with most other countries.⁸⁸

Despite all the talk about the need for educational reforms, little serious attention is being paid to a fundamental way in which Japan's schoolchildren are being shortchanged. Except among the educators directly involved, few have expressed concern over the Education Ministry's announcement that libraries in elementary and junior high schools nationwide are lacking the astonishing total of more than 65 million books—books they should have if they were following the new standard set by the ministry in 1993.

This means that, on average, each school is short 2,600 library books that could be providing a wide range of information and knowledge to the nation's children. The 1993 standards were intended to raise the number of books on school library shelves by 1.5 times, on the basis of the number of pupils enrolled. Yet fully 70 percent of the elementary schools and 80 percent of the junior high schools acknowledged in a survey conducted in May 1999 that they have fewer books on their

shelves than are recommended. This is so even though the Education and Home Affairs ministries together have been allocating some 10 billion yen a year to municipalities to help them meet the new targets.

Too many schools are failing to do so, since some 14 percent of elementary school libraries and nearly 22 percent of junior high school libraries have fewer than half the books they should. The reason for this is not because enrollments are down, but because in the face of budget shortfalls some schools are using the funds for other purposes.

Educational reform starts in the library. Japan suffers from a severe shortage of trained librarians. When Education Ministry officials surveyed the schools last year, only 574 registered librarians were recorded nationwide.

More trained librarians will make a difference. Any school with more than 12 classes will be required to have a trained librarian on the staff from the start of fiscal 2003. That means the hiring of some 24,000 librarians by elementary and junior high schools around the country.⁸⁹

The interim report from the National Commission on Educational Reform, an advisory panel of the prime minister, appears cautious about revising the 1947 Fundamental Law on Education. While acknowledging that “there is as yet no consensus on what specific changes should be made,” the report proposes that all public-school students should engage in “voluntary (community) activities” for a specific period each year—two weeks for elementary and junior high-school students and a month for senior high-school students. The implication is that such extracurricular activities would be obligatory for all practical purposes, since all students would be required to do community work.

It is true that today’s schoolchildren lack the ability to communicate.

But this ability cannot be cultivated by forcing them to mix with their neighbors in the name of community service. What they need is voluntary social experience. Children find out more about themselves when they do what they like, on their own. They learn the importance of respecting social mores through free association with people. What is needed is a menu of options, not a set of obligatory programs.⁹⁰

National education should aim at fostering morally sound Japanese. Something is wrong with today's Japanese, and the more education reforms are delayed, the more Japan will be filled with these unsound people.⁹¹

Young people today are taught to expect things but are not taught their value or how to secure them, and adults are at fault for overprotecting and spoiling their offspring, according to psychiatrist Shizuo Machizawa. This, he said, is made even worse by a society that values results over process.

Today's youth are caught in a dilemma, trapped between their parent's overprotection and high expectations, and are suffocating. Machizawa stressed that Japanese society must change, and tolerance must be taught to kids through the process of problem-solving.

"Finding the answers to life is difficult, but you need to be very tolerant to get on with it. Japanese should value the process of things over the results and teach all kids that they are precious individuals," he said.⁹²

As Jonathan Swift once said, "When a true genius appears in the world, you may know him by this sign, that the dunces are all in confederacy against him."⁹³

Yuan Lee, a 1986 Nobel Prize recipient in chemistry once said, "The ability to achieve high examination marks has very little to do with the

ability to make scientific discoveries.” He stressed the importance of developing creativity and imagination among children at an annual series of forums by Nobel laureates.⁹⁴

Reona Esaki, winner of the Nobel Prize in physics and head of a government education reform panel, says he will strive to create a “custom-made” education system to meet the needs of individual students.

“There are ready-made clothes and there are custom-made clothes, but people look better in outfits tailored to fit their needs,” Esaki said in an interview with Kyodo News. “It’s the same for education. I don’t think people’s talents can be fully tapped unless there is custom-made education.”

The 74-year-old former president of the state-run Tsukuba University said the nation’s education system so far has been more of a “ready-made” system, putting emphasis on training people to develop the skills society demands.

“This approach is similar to building infrastructure,” Esaki said. “I think we should take an approach that focuses on the level of each individual,” one that aims at fostering creativity, he added.⁹⁵

Masao Kimura, 54, is a frequent lecturer at seminars sponsored by private firms and local governments. “Scrap the systems we have today and build new ones,” he said in reference to the straitjacketlike constraints for just about everything in Japan, ranging from government administration to corporate management and education. Then, he said, he would tackle education reform, promoting universities with distinctive features, such as “one that can create Japan’s No. 1 carpenter.” “Not everyone can or must go to the University of Tokyo ... and we just don’t need all those so-so universities with their near-identical depart-

ments,” he said. A university in Tottori Prefecture, for instance, should take advantage of its sand dunes—the area’s most distinctive geographical feature—and become the top school in the study of deserts, he said.⁹⁶

Japan’s schools should look to the U.S. system and place more emphasis on developing students’ individual abilities, making class sizes smaller and making grade skipping more flexible, according to Reona “Leo” Esaki, head of an education reform panel.

As in the United States, talented children should be able to skip grades from a young age, while those having difficulties should be able to repeat a grade. “Skipping grades is one way to make education fit each child...That’s what I call the ‘custom made’ education,” said Esaki.

There have been over 1,600 letters sent to Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi concerning Japan’s school reform. Opinions focused on how to improve moral education and raise the quality of teachers, he said. To tackle those problems, teachers need at least one year to study counseling skills, or schools should have both academic advisers and therapists like some schools in the United States, he said.⁹⁷

One reformer is Yohei Sasaki. Yohei Sasaki is an elementary school teacher in Fujisawa, Kanagawa Prefecture. A group of teachers and parents in Fujisawa are trying to set up a public free school—a Japanese version of chartered schools in the United States.

Chartered schools, first established in Minnesota in 1992, are operated with tax-payer money by local citizens or by private corporations, based on a contract with a local government.

These schools, now numbering some 1,700 in the U.S., have great freedom in setting up their own curricula but are required to achieve their educational objectives within a chartered period of about five

years, or face closure. Yohei Sasaki, 37, is at the center of the movement to create such a new type of public school in Japan.⁹⁸

Eikoh President Masahito Kitayama, operator of major cram school Eikoh Seminar, believes that a large section of the education system should be privatized, with the state issuing vouchers for parents and students to pay for a private school of their choice—an idea similar to the one proposed by the prime minister's panel on Japan's goals in the 21st century.⁹⁹

There are exceptions to the educational rule. A case in point recently took place in Okinawa. A 15-year-old boy attending the Amerasian School in the city of Okinawa has received an official diploma from a Japanese junior high, even though his school is not recognized by the local board of education.

Ricky Agarijo received his diploma from Okinawa's municipal Misato Junior High School after his attendance at the Amerasian School was recognized under a special arrangement as equivalent to studying at a Japanese public junior high school.

The Amerasian School in Okinawa is a private institution that conducts classes in English, with lessons in Japanese provided twice a week. Agarijo is the first student from the school to receive an official Japanese diploma.

Agarijo, born in Los Angeles to Okinawan parents, said he plans to finish his secondary studies in the U.S. before considering attending a Japanese high school.¹⁰⁰

It is harder to teach children how to think than to merely cram facts and formulas into their heads. Many teachers lack the expertise to teach in a creative manner, and the result is a poorer education for students.¹⁰¹ A scholastic aptitude test conducted by the Education

Ministry has shown that Japanese elementary and middle school students may have knowledge of many facts but they have little ability to think logically.¹⁰²

According to Kazuhiro Arai, professor of economics at Hitotsubashi University, the lifetime employment system originated in the middle of Edo Period (1603–1867). At that time, some children started to work as apprentices. They learned the craft and were then promoted. When they retired from the shops they received an allowance. As time passed, the system spread and by the early 1970s, it was lauded as a key factor in Japan's soaring economic growth, Arai said.

Few companies are willing to scrap the lifetime employment system. About 55 percent of companies said they intend to maintain the lifetime employment system, according to a survey by the Japan Productivity Center for Socio-Economic Development in 1998.¹⁰³

The kind of staffers companies in Japan want is changing. Generalists are no longer in such demand, and more and more specialists are being required by companies trying to get ahead.

The ways of the past are no longer the ways of the present, in light of the differing values of Japanese educational reforms. The accepted practice of, so to speak, "one size fits all—right off the rack" is an educational model whose era is quickly coming to an end. Free thinkers and innovators are replacing the generalists. It all begins with a shift in educational prerogatives.

A recent survey by Recruit Co. showed that 48.2 percent of businesspeople between the ages of 25 and 40 believe they are in danger of losing their job due to their companies' bankruptcy or restructuring plans. The survey also indicated that 92 percent want to have practical abilities that they can use outside their present office.¹⁰⁴

“More and more businesspeople are defining cross-cultural competence as essential for their workforce,” Jeffrey Milem, an assistant professor at the University of Maryland, College Park, said. “If they do not have employees sensitive to these issues, they risk alienating large segments of the market-place. People in education can learn from them. “Exposure to diversity leads to such benefits as increases in racial awareness to a greater involvement in political and social affairs,” Milem says.¹⁰⁵

Business schools and other graduate programs that promise practical expertise will open their doors as early as April of the year 2000 in the nation’s universities, the Education Ministry said.

Although programs that focus on professional development already exist at some graduate schools, this is the first time such programs will be systematically incorporated as part of the nation’s formal educational system.¹⁰⁶

Why must changes be made at this time? Why can’t the status quo in education and employment practices continue? One reason is evident. Young workers are losing the skills necessary for a competitive workforce because they lack the patience to stay at one job for a long period. This problem must be dealt with by the nation’s educational system.¹⁰⁷

CONCLUSION

What is good for the goose may not be good for the gander. Federal bureaucrats and the executives of private industries are not currently in total agreement when it comes to hiring the type of person who is best for the job. Government advisory panels in Japan have suggested that business and educational programs be less dictatorial, allowing for

students and workers to exercise more personal freedom. In the West, however, there seems to be too much student freedom, in particular, and measures have been taken to curtail the side effects which have proven to be detrimental to society.

There is a time and place for everything. It is logical and prudent to find the time to make plans for both short and long term goals, and to carry them out. To learn from past mistakes and successes can only result in a brighter future for all concerned. If the Japanese are, indeed, overtly preoccupied with the present, their societal changes and progress in general will be impeded. Perhaps further research into this abstract area of lifestyle is warranted.

Quality education has nothing to do with whether a school is private or public. What counts are high-quality teachers, modern facilities, rigorous academic standards, plus the resources to offer individualized assistance to kids who need help.¹⁰⁸

The regard we hold for people's morality and morale are issues which are, at present, being evaluated. The formula for "happiness", in terms of living a good, healthy life, is still being sought after. Although the concept of happiness is a puzzlement, one thing is certain. Now is the time to consider the consequences for our actions. Japan and the West have uncovered an aspect of some behavioral problems. What remains to be solved are the root causes for humankind's rebellion. Education is a very good starting point!

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