Japanese Lessons
Benjamin, Gail R.

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Now that Sam and Ellen were fully equipped for school, belonged to a walking group and a classroom, and were prepared to begin the life of a Japanese schoolchild, we all wondered what that life would be like, how the hours of school would be spent, just how different a classroom in Japan could be from one in America.

Our first hint of the answers to these questions came from the class schedules. Though there are of course variations in the routine, the basic format of the school week is laid out in a schedule established by the teacher at the beginning of the year. Sam and Ellen each brought home a printed weekly schedule to keep in a special pocket on the flap of the book bag.

The teachers have taken some trouble to make the schedules look nice, and the first-grade schedule is written almost exclusively in the syllabary that almost all children can read when they enter first grade but can certainly read by the end of the first term of the school year. The same schedule is written on a poster in each classroom; it doesn’t change over the course of the school year.

There are a number of interesting features in these schedules. First, although school begins at 8:30 and children are required to be at
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school by that time, most of them arrive earlier because the walking group timetable assures it. The schedule begins at 8:50, except on Tuesday, when there is a school-wide assembly each week. Second, Ellen’s schedule, for first grade, shows an irregular dismissal time, anywhere from 2:00 to 2:45. This is common in Japanese schools; the dismissal time of 3:40 for older students is felt to make too long a day for first graders. Thus, first graders officially spend thirty-three hours per week in school, fifth graders forty hours and fifty minutes. This includes the Saturday hours for everyone and a required hour for club activities on Wednesday afternoon for students in fourth grade and older.

Despite what looks like a full schedule during those hours, Sam’s startling observation that there is a lot more time to play in school in Japan led us to look at the schedule more closely. He was right; there is much more time not given over to formal classroom instruction in this school than in the American schools with which we were familiar. To begin with there’s the twenty minutes between 8:30 and 8:50. On Ellen’s schedule this is marked “individual preparation,” a time for children to get organized for the day, to finish up homework, to move their supplies from their book bags into their desks, to greet friends, and to prepare for the day. It’s time when the classrooms are noisy with talk, laughter, and play, when teachers are probably not in the room, so that the children are not being subjected to close scrutiny.

Bells ring throughout the day to signal breaks between periods. There is a five-minute break between the first and second and between the third and fourth periods and a ten-minute break between the fifth and sixth periods. These breaks are truly breaks; children can play, talk, and move about during them, going to the bathroom or into the hall for drinks. Teachers don’t seem to feel a need to keep the noise down during these periods, and the children are livelier than would be tolerated in many American schools. On the other hand, neither students nor teachers move to other classrooms during this time, and so the confusion of gathering up school materials and going from room to
room is eliminated. (There are very few special teachers in elementary schools, and they come to the children's room for their classes. The students don't move except to the gymnasium or outdoors for physical education or to the science lab once or twice a week.)

The whole school has a twenty-minute recess between the second and third periods. Most days everyone goes outdoors for free play. In bad weather the gym is used along with the hallways and one or two special playrooms in the building. This is generally a recess for the teachers too; only a few are on the playground. (There were five teachers on playground duty for a thousand students, the days I counted.) Children are not considered to be in danger during play time nor to be dangerous to others. On days of some wonderful snowfalls, I saw students throwing snowballs at each other and at teachers who returned the favor. Other pupils ran into the fence to knock down avalanches of snow on friends who crowded close, yelling at the joy of it all.

The playground equipment itself would not be found in U.S. playgrounds because it would be regarded as too dangerous. The slides and climbing apparatuses are quite tall; it would be easy to fall from them, and the ground underneath is hard dirt. The swings are wooden, and there are no guard rails to keep other children from running in front of them. The hurdles in the ground around the edges of the playground are not fenced off; it seemed as if children playing tag around them could trip.

Despite the apparent physical dangers of the playground and other areas Japanese children frequent, such as city streets, and despite their use of fireworks and other dangerous toys, they don't seem to get hurt very often. It's not a perfect measure of accident rates, but United Nations World Health Organization data show lower death rates from accidents, including traffic, drowning, and others, for Japanese children than for American children.

The most noticeable time-out is lunch time—one hour and twenty-five minutes. This includes time for eating, a recess period, and daily cleaning. Lunches are prepared in the kitchen by professionals but are
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eaten in the classrooms. (Like rooms in Japanese houses, classrooms are used for many purposes.) Students are assigned on a rotating basis to bring the carts of food from the kitchen, dish it out to everyone, clean up, and return dishes and food to the kitchen.

There are no janitors in schools in Japan, so students and teachers take care of cleaning everything except the kitchen. This means classrooms, hallways, stairs, bathrooms, and grounds; they also take care of the school’s animals and their houses. Cleaning in a Japanese building means primarily cleaning the floors. All the hallways, stairs and classrooms are swept and polished every day, with desks and other furniture moved aside to ensure a complete job.

The work is divided into different chores, and work groups are assigned chores on a rotating basis—no one much likes doing the bathrooms. Some jobs can be done more playfully than others. Nor is this frowned on. No one minds if a group of five whose task is to polish the classroom floor turns this into a race while pushing the polishing rags across the floor. Cleaning is required school work, but it’s surely closer to play than sitting at a desk being talked to by a teacher.

Since we have returned home, Sam and Ellen have complained about the cleaning, though they didn’t voice any objections or even think it was worth talking about while we were there. They now say it was hard work and sometimes distasteful. Cleaning the toilets, even with plastic gloves on, was “gross” and “disgusting.” The other jobs were also not fun but serious work, in their view. But they have never expressed the idea that it was inappropriate for students to do this, whereas most American children who hear about it immediately suggest they would expect to be paid.

Training children to take on responsibility in a group, for the group, is a legitimate task of schools in Japan, and cleaning is a major tool for teaching this. It’s not part of a “hidden agenda”; it’s part of the curriculum. It also encourages children to think of the school as theirs, as a place they each have a stake in. Cleaning is not play, but it’s different from instructional class time.
Finally, dismissal from school may not mean the end of playtime. Everyone lives within walking distance of school, so no one is being picked up by a school bus or a car pool and whisked away; many children either stay on the playground (it’s the biggest open area in the neighborhood) or walk home with friends slowly—Sam and Ellen took up to an hour to make it home. I worried, but that’s because I’m American. A common family rule among my friends was that their children should be home by 5:00.

Japanese parents realistically do not worry about their children being kidnapped, accosted, or molested, either by adults or by older children. They do not worry about their children doing inappropriate activities when they are not under close supervision, and children seem welcome in stores and snack shops. They get modest allowances to spend as they please, usually on food and toys. Japanese parents also seem not to worry about their children getting hurt in traffic, though three years of living in Japan has not been enough to make me feel safe about adults walking or bicycling around, let alone children. This is a misperception on my part, though; pedestrian accident rates are low.

The academic part of the school schedule is largely determined by the Ministry of Education, which issues guidelines on the number of class hours that should be devoted to each subject each year. In Ellen’s case those specifications take up twenty-four of the twenty-nine class periods each week. The teacher can decide how to allocate the rest of the time. In Ellen’s class and in most classes, one period a week is devoted to a class meeting. Ellen says this time was usually spent talking about problems, but sometimes class meetings were fun and included games or play.

For Ellen’s first-grade class, Japanese (the name under which reading is taught) gets eight periods a week, mathematics four, social studies two, science two, music two, art one double period, morals one, and physical education three. The textbooks are chosen from a small number of series approved by the Ministry of Education; teachers
supplement these with commercially available materials geared to the textbooks and with materials they prepare themselves.

Sam’s fifth-grade schedule includes five periods a week for Japanese, five for math, three for social studies, three for science, two for music, one for morals, three for physical education, two for home economics, a double period for art, and one for calligraphy. Wednesday afternoon there is a club meeting, and that still leaves four periods a week at the teacher’s discretion.

There is a morning assembly for the whole school on Tuesdays from 8:30 to 8:50, sometimes held outdoors and sometimes in the gymnasium. Its main feature is usually an address by the principal on a theme of his choosing. Each class marches in as a group and lines up as one of the older students in charge for the day issues commands for students to stand at attention, dress their lines by extending arms to the side and to the front, bow to the principal, and then stand at ease for his talk. All the students sing the school song before the talk. At the end of the meeting the student in charge again gives the commands for coming to attention and bowing, and then classes march around the room or the area and back to their classrooms.

Just as there is a weekly routine, there is also a routine that establishes the modes of behavior for each class period. Each day there are two children in each class who together are in charge of issuing the verbal commands that get pupils ready to be taught and help them move through their day. In the morning these children report the attendance to the teacher. They take care of getting all the desks in the proper order for the kind of class coming up. Sometimes desks are arranged in rows and lines, sometimes pushed out of the way altogether, sometimes gathered in groups of four or five facing each other. At the beginning of each period the leaders announce the subject and the page in the textbook and ask everyone to get ready and be quiet. This is all done in standardized verbal formulas. They look around to be sure that everyone is in proper order and may sometimes tell one or two children to sit up straighter or stop talking. They then announce
to the teacher that all is ready and call on the class to stand and bow. Everyone says, "Sensei, onegai shimasu" "Teacher, do us the favor (of teaching us)." The teacher then begins to teach.

All of this happens very quickly, taking perhaps two to three minutes, with the beginning and end of each class also marked by school-wide bells. The bells are treated as signals, but the classroom routines are more important. Students don’t assume that they should immediately be released at the first vibrations of the bell. In general I was struck with two contradictory feelings as I observed these routines. First, the routines are followed very easily and quickly; the whole pace of movement in this school feels very lively. Second, the routines and the schedule are treated as a comforting set of guidelines. There is no sense of hurry or compulsion about getting things done exactly on the button, but the end result is that things are accomplished very smoothly and on schedule.

A FULL-TIME OCCUPATION

Like other occupations in Japan, being an elementary schoolchild is considered a full-time job. This seems a reasonable assessment of the role school plays in the lives of children. Consider the days and hours that elementary school occupies. Elementary school is in session 240 days a year, for forty-one hours each week (less for first graders). The forty-one hours include Monday through Friday from 8:30 A.M. to 3:40 P.M., 8:30 to 12:30 on Saturday, and one hour of required club meeting on Wednesday afternoon. Japanese children go to school 1,640 hours a year. American elementary schools vary but are typically in session 180 days a year, thirty-two and a half hours a week, or 1,070 hours a year.

By comparison, U.S. Civil Service employees are considered to have a working year of 2,080 hours per year, only 440 hours more than Japanese children put in. American children are “at work” about half time compared with these American adults. Adults, of course, don’t
have homework at night and during vacations, as Japanese and American children do. If we compare schooltime for Japanese and American children in terms of school days, then the Japanese children spend the equivalent of twelve more weeks a year in school than American children. They spend the equivalent of seventeen more weeks in school in terms of hours at school.

But as we have seen from Sam's and Ellen's schedules, not all school time in Japan is class time. For Sam about eleven hours a week was taken up with recess, lunch, cleaning, and other nonclass activities. These are all considered educational in the wider sense in Japan, but they are not class hours. In the United States we might reasonably estimate that one hour a day, or five hours a week, is spent in recesses and lunch periods. In terms of class hours, then, Japanese students have about 1,200 hours a year, Americans 890 hours. This translates to a difference of almost ten weeks more class time for the Japanese students.

School, then, simply takes up more time for Japanese children than for American children. The importance of school, defining the Japanese child's status and occupation, is reflected in other ways too. One is that children are seldom identified by age but rather by grade in school. Parents say, "My son is a third grader" instead of "My son is nine years old." Adults scold children by saying, "That's not how a sixth grader should behave." Strangers ask a child, "What grade are you in?" not "How old are you?"

A second sign of the importance of school and the occupation of being a schoolchild is all the equipment and specialized paraphernalia required for elementary school children, different from that used by older students or adults. Besides the materials mentioned in the first chapter, a desk and study space are provided for each student in even the most cramped and crowded house. Each winter as the preparations for a new school year in April get under way and stores begin major promotions of school materials, there are special sales on these desks. They cost about Y50,000 ($355) for the desk, plus Y15,000 ($100)
for the chair. The desks all have a place to hang the backpack, a light, a timer for practice tests, a place to put the weekly schedule, and a buzzer. Everyone knows that the buzzer will be used to call Mother to bring a snack or to help with homework or just to offer encouragement and sympathy.

**CLASS TIME**

When we hear about the high achievement levels typically reached in Japanese elementary schools and the discipline and social pressure for conformity that are often said to characterize the Japanese, it is easy to imagine what Japanese elementary schools must be like. Usually Americans expect them to be quiet, disciplined, tightly controlled environments with teachers in charge who manage the social and academic activities so that a minimum amount of "wasted time" interferes with a learning program that requires great concentration from students and intense teaching from teachers.

I was able to observe the classes of several teachers at first-, second-, fifth- and sixth-grade levels, in the subjects of music, science, physical education, morals, and reading, and I talked with Sam and Ellen about other classes. There were differences among teachers and among classes in different subject areas, but there were also common approaches and techniques that were different from those usually found in American classrooms. Like other observers, I was struck by the easy, relaxed discipline, the quick pace, and the high degree of student participation in these classes. The students seemed to be engaged, active, lively, and anything but downtrodden.

At Okubo Higashi, as in most urban schools in Japan, class sizes vary from thirty to about forty-five students, drawn from the immediate neighborhood and not grouped or tracked by ability; the purpose is rather to give each class an equal mix of abilities and characteristics. Since Japanese neighborhoods are less economically segregated than those in many other countries, there is usually a wide range of socio-
economic backgrounds represented in each classroom also. In less densely settled areas of Japan, classes may be smaller and more homogeneous. This is generally seen as a disadvantage.

The rooms at Okubo Higashi are standard issue classrooms. There is a wall of windows on the south side, the major source of heat and light. At one end of the room is a blackboard, and bulletin boards are found on the other walls, though there are also windows into the hallway on the north side of the room. Access to the outdoors is from doors in the window wall; classrooms on the upper floors open onto a balcony. Each student has a cubbyhole where the backpack and personal belongings are kept during the day. Each room has a desk for the teacher, a desk for each child, an electric organ, and some bookcases. Each room at Okubo Higashi also has a gas heater in one corner for use in the winter. For the younger grades there is a flimsy guard fence around this stove. The stove is an immovable object, because of its venting system.

Children have all their classes in the same room except for physical education and, for the upper grades, science labs. Music, art, and science all involve the use of equipment in the classroom, brought out for use and then stored again. Like Japanese houses, the classrooms give the impression not of being cluttered so much as being packed full of useful things. They are also liberally decorated with work done by the students, as are the hallways. These are not specially chosen pieces of work. If drawings from the expedition to the park are exhibited, the drawing of every student will be included. If the calligraphy exercises are being shown, everyone’s is there. The school motto is displayed in each room as well as admonitions about behavior, changed from time to time (sample: “Let’s all listen when someone is speaking”) and the class’s weekly schedule. Children are expected to take home most of their books and equipment such as pencils, crayons, and so forth each day, not leaving them in their desks or cubbyholes. Teachers, too, remove many belongings each day, in their case to a permanent desk in the teachers’ room.
Because there are times during the day when children stay in the classroom but teachers leave to go to the teachers’ room, there is a sense in which the room belongs to the students, the class, more than to the teacher. The children’s imprint on the classroom in terms of paraphernalia and decorations is much stronger than the teacher’s.

In Japanese houses, the furniture is movable, and it is often moved. In nearly every Japanese home, for instance, the room that is used for eating, watching TV, and most other activities during the day is also used for sleeping. Beds (soft mattresses and quilts) are stored in large cupboards during the day, and the daytime furniture is shoved aside each night to make room for sleeping. Even if there are separate bedrooms for some members of the family, the bedding is seldom left in place all day; it is stored away and the room used for play, study, and other activities until bedtime. (Bedding left on the floor all day is a sure sign of immorally sloppy housekeeping, and besides, they say, the bedding will get moldy if it is not put outside to air every sunny day.) The notion of a fixed arrangement of furniture that remains constant is not part of usual Japanese life at home, and certainly not at school. I would guess that the furniture in Japanese classrooms gets rearranged four to six times a day for different activities. This means moving all the movable elements—the teacher’s desk, the student desks, the organ.

For some classes the desks are in parallel rows facing front. There is an assigned seating order for this arrangement. In some classes two rows are pushed together with a boy and a girl sharing each pair of seats. In other classes, though the boys and girls are not separated, the arrangement is somewhat looser. Rows of desks face the front for classes such as reading, when everyone in the class is doing the same thing and not working in small groups. Sometimes in Sam’s class, he said, there would be two long rows of desks facing two more rows on the other side of the room with the teacher pacing the middle area.

Another pattern, all the desks in a circle around the edges of the room, is used for large group discussions. When small work groups
(ban groups; see chapter 4) are engaged in activities together, the desks are placed in clusters, with each desk facing the others in its group. Such study groups might be formed for almost any subject.

One common U.S. classroom practice that does not occur is to have a portion of the class interacting with the teacher while other members of the class work individually on other subjects or assignments. In other words there are no reading or math groups divided by ability level, no times when some members of the class are separated from the others to receive different instruction. In Japan all students are working on the same class material at all times, sometimes as individuals, sometimes as a large class group, and sometimes in small groups.

Classrooms are multipurpose rooms, and Japanese elementary school teachers are multipurpose teachers, too. Teachers are not specialists but teach all the subject areas. Guidelines imposed by the school and the Ministry of Education regarding how many hours should be spent on each subject each year prevent teachers from idiosyncratically emphasizing their favorite subjects or slighting areas they do not like teaching. The prevailing philosophy, that everyone can do everything if they try, applies to teachers too, who as a matter of course teach art, music, physical education, mathematics, reading, social studies, morals, home economics, and everything else that elementary school students are expected to learn.

The various ways of arranging the furniture of the rooms give some indication of the variety of teaching formats that children will encounter during a day—all, however, with the same group of fellow students and the same teacher. In many if not most schools, students in a given class remain together for two years with the same teacher.

In America Sam and Ellen have always been in schools that prided themselves on the number of specialist teachers they were able to provide, for art, music, physical education, foreign language, and computer skills. They have also had rather complicated methods of providing specialist teachers for academic subjects. Some schools have grouped the children in a grade by ability, and had each homeroom
teacher teach one or two subjects to several different groups at different times; some also have provided special teachers for enrichment or remedial work. The upshot of these efforts to give students well-qualified teachers, teaching to each child’s level of achievement in a small group of similar students, is that an individual child has to deal with the personalities and teaching styles of as many as six different teachers each week or even each day, and with the personalities and group dynamics of as many groups of fellow students.

I would find it difficult to work in such circumstances; I have always thought that this typical mode of classroom organization places great burdens on American students. It may also help to explain why American teachers feel psychologically overloaded. They often complain that it is difficult to know many students well and say that problems are created when children do not have adequate opportunities to become adjusted to an individual teacher’s style. The disadvantage of the Japanese system, of course, is that occasionally a student and a teacher experience a real antipathy, with no relief. Teachers say this is a relatively rare occurrence, however.

Japanese students are faced each period of the day and week with a fairly constant schedule. Each class’s program for accommodating the required hours of study for each subject remains the same for an entire year. Sometimes this is disrupted, as when preparations for Sports Day involve some activity every day during September; in addition, four whole days are given entirely to preparation for this event. Generally, though, life is predictable.

The course of a class is predictable, too. Teachers work hard at the beginning of the year and during the first years of school to teach students to manage the routines of classroom procedures, so that the teachers can be uninvolved in activities that are not teaching. Because the class leaders are responsible for getting everyone ready for class, teachers can begin classes not having had to tell anyone to be quiet, nor urge anyone to get ready, nor scold anyone for slowness. The teacher’s job is teaching, not classroom management.
Much of the class time in Japanese schools looks familiar, consisting of a period of teacher explanation or teaching, a period when the teacher asks questions and members of the class raise their hands to respond, and a summarization period. On closer observation, however, there are some striking differences from American practices. One is the way every student who volunteers seems to be given recognition, and another is the role of the teacher in judging student responses.

Teachers appear to have several techniques to make classes feel more participatory. In one sixth-grade reading class students seemed to be reluctant to take part in a discussion of a new story (I think my presence made a difference). When several students did raise their hands to respond to a discussion point, the teacher called on one, who gave an answer. Then he gave each of the others a chance to respond also. Many of them simply said, "The same," which seemed to be treated as a legitimate response, and both students and teacher appeared to feel the contribution was constructive. The students were apparently not striving for uniqueness. Sam said one of his teacher's techniques was to ask everyone who had volunteered to stand at once. She would then choose one student to give an answer, and those who had planned to say the same thing would all sit down, leaving those with different responses to offer still standing until their answers had been requested. This pattern of giving every volunteer recognition, even for a response such as "the same," prevailed in all the classes I watched, and student responses were not commented on by the teacher, either positively or negatively. They were assumed to be correct, unless students objected.

I did see teachers use questioning of specific students in a controlling way a few times. In these cases the teacher would call on a child who had not volunteered by name. The child would stand in the usual way and sometimes give the required answer, but more commonly would look at the floor and mumble "Mo kangacte iru," "I'm still thinking about it," a formula for avoiding an answer that still is less self-denigrating than "I don't know" or some other alternatives one can imagine.
One of the most startling sights for me the first time I saw it was what happens when a student gives an incorrect answer. Other students immediately raise their hands, calling out loudly, "Chigaimasu!", "That's wrong!" One of those who called out would then be chosen to give another answer. Or, as Sam reported, in his class if you were the one whose answer was wrong, you got to call on someone to correct you.

It was seeing this happen that led me to focus my later observations on the practice of teachers in evaluating student participation. It became clear that teachers routinely and emphatically refrain from giving either positive or negative evaluations of students' answers to questions or other responses to academic material. Those responses are evaluated, but only by other students. If no one objects to what you've said, you can assume, and the rest of the class can assume, that it was right, at least for the time being; it doesn't need to be said or restated by the teacher for it to have validity and authority.

I don't mean to suggest that teachers can't or don't manipulate a series of questions to lead to conclusions or points they want established, nor that their tactics necessarily are ones that kids can't figure out. But I am saying that teachers do not use their authority as masters of the material or as adults to establish the correctness of answers or responses made by students. Instead, peers are the source of validation or correction of a student's responses.

Students are often sent to the board, singly or in groups or as representatives of their groups to write answers to math problems or science problems or for other activities. It is a common practice for these students, either individuals or groups, to be applauded by the entire class for successful performance. Students show by smiles and bows that they appreciate this approval. The teacher may sometimes initiate the applause, but her role is subordinated to the class's; it is the class's applause that students acknowledge, not teacher praise.

Nor is the value of student responses solely a matter of their correctness. When leading class discussions, teachers are careful to list and
acknowledge all the positions and arguments contributed during the discussion. Offering an idea that eventually is rejected is still seen as worthwhile, because the reasoning that leads to its rejection is a way to learn. Students, at least in science classes, do not seem so attached to the ideas they individually have proposed that they are not willing to change their minds.

Several classes that I visited, in reading, science, and morals, ended with individual writing as a summary activity. In these cases the teacher handed out small, unintimidating pieces of paper with an illustration and a lined space for writing. Each child was to answer a broad question concerning the lesson on the paper. The teacher wandered through the class as this was going on and watched what was being written. Either by marking the paper as he went through the class or by calling on a number of pupils at the end of the allotted time, he chose a group of different responses, and the authors read to the class what they had written. No teacher comment was made—none, either positive or negative.

Similarly, at the end of a second-grade science laboratory class on materials that do or do not conduct electricity, the last activity involved making a switch to turn on and off the current from a battery to a light bulb. The teacher moved through the class as the students worked. At the end she asked six children to come to the front of the room and demonstrate their switches. The switches were all different and all successful, but no comments were made about which were “better.” There seemed to be some expression of delight from those watching. The teacher’s only action was to choose the examples shared with the class; she made no comments or compliments.

Not only do Japanese teachers, then, stay in the background as far as the social management of the class and the classroom goes, but they try to do the same when it comes to academic material as well. Evaluation by one’s fellow students is focused on more than evaluation by the teacher, by teacher design.
Of course, Japanese teachers do not just let incorrect responses stand, nor do they fail to exercise discretion in the written selections that are read out loud, but they do use manipulation of further discussion or follow-on questions to get to the points they want clarified, without relying on out-and-out correction of student responses. They do not act in authoritarian ways, as academic authorities, as much as teachers do in many other systems.

Most Americans expect that in a classroom students should encounter new materials or ideas and incorporate those materials and ideas into their existing mental frameworks, thereby changing them, and "learning." If we think that this process entails playing around with ideas in an experimental mode, then an important function of teaching is to provide feedback on the efforts of learners to use the ideas. They must try out the ideas, present the results of their trial thinking or use of the materials and ideas, and then get some evaluation of their efforts.

In American classrooms teachers are the evaluators. Through their assessments of student responses as right or wrong, acceptable or in need of additional work, they let students know about their progress in learning. Teachers are supposed to know and understand the materials they are teaching, and they serve as the authorities on thinking and operating with that material; they decide who has mastered it. It is considered important classroom practice to give students timely feedback about their responses, feedback that lets them know whether they are on the right track or not. We reasonably expect this judgment to come from the teacher, who is after all the one with the most knowledge, the one who can make the judgments accurately; she is the authority.

In the Japanese classrooms that I observed, teachers almost completely delegated this teaching function to students. Teachers almost never corrected or praised student responses. Students did this, and some student responses, usually at the end of a class session, were left
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without any overt evaluation. A set of attitudes about evaluation of schoolwork is being conveyed by these practices. One is that teachers are not available arbiters of correctness, because they fail to act as judges. Another is that one’s peers are a reliable guide to academic correctness. If one’s peers are capable of being reliable authorities, then one is oneself likely to be reliable. Third, this custom of peer evaluation implies a contract according to which each student must to be willing to correct fellow students and to accept their correction. Calling out “Chigaimasu.” “It’s not that way!” involves some danger to one’s own face—after all, the other guy may be right. At the same time it is a challenge to the fellow student you have accused of being wrong. I think children become more sensitive to this dilemma as they grow older, comparing my time in fifth- and sixth-grade classes with the time I spent in first- and second-grade classrooms. That may be why in the upper grades a challenged student is allowed to choose a corrector. Fourth, students learn that evaluation need not always be explicitly formulated or made public. Confronted with the writings of a number of classmates in the setting where no comments are made, one may make one’s own judgments, or withhold judgment altogether, and do so privately. No one else intervenes to judge your judgments. One effect of this standard procedure is to emphasize that each person’s judgment is valid and can stand alone. But it also teaches children that others may be judging their actions and work even when nothing is said openly.

Perhaps the ultimate realization of how independently Japanese elementary school classes can operate both socially and academically was brought home to me the day Ellen reported at supper that her teacher had been absent that day. To my routine query about what the substitute teacher had been like, she replied that there was no substitute. I asked somewhat anxiously how they had managed and what had happened, and she replied, “Oh, Kuroda sensei wrote on the board what we were supposed to do, and sometimes a teacher looked in the room.” There were no riots, and they did their work, she said. Sam
said his teacher had been gone that day, too, and they did the same thing. I later asked other parents about this and learned that it is routine practice. When I questioned the principal sometime later, he confirmed that several teachers had gone to a training course for two days and that no, they didn’t get substitute teachers unless a teacher was absent for a long time—a month or more. Some parents nowadays object to the absence of a teacher, not because they worry about discipline but because they are concerned about their children falling behind academically, so schools are starting to use more substitutes. I still can’t decide whether it’s more extraordinary to be able to leave thirty-five first graders with no teacher for two full days, or to be able to leave forty-five fifth graders in the same situation. Sam did say the fifth graders didn’t work as hard as usual.

REPORT CARDS, JUKU, AND EXAMINATIONS

There are some other contexts in which teachers make very overt judgments of student work. Homework is often corrected by the teacher and is used as a monitor of student progress. Report cards also reflect evaluation by teachers. Because there is a standard curriculum and a timetable for getting through it, the report card for each marking period, three a year, lists specific areas of competence, such as “addition and subtraction of numbers through 100” in the third term of first grade. Students are graded as average, high, or low. There are schoolwide criteria for assigning the grades: 15 percent of the students get “high,” 75 percent “average,” 10 percent “low” at Okubo Higashi. These grades have few or no consequences. Passing a grade does not depend on grades—everyone passes, as a matter of national policy. Being a student of a certain grade is a process of life, not an accomplishment. After all, no one fails to pass from being nine years old to being ten years old, and similarly it is impossible to fail to become a fourth-grade student after a year as a third-grade student.
There are two other arenas, very different from the institutional elementary schools, in which children and parents get “authoritative” feedback on academic performance. One is *juku* and private testing services, and the other is the high school entrance examinations. *Juku* are private, commercial tutoring schools. They range from in-home tutoring of a few students by a housewife, through neighborhood operations that enroll enough children to support a family, though probably modestly, to nationwide chains with hundreds of branch offices. They divide children by achievement levels and provide remedial help for those who are falling behind, additional practice for those who are keeping up, and accelerated or enriched programs for the academically advanced. They have smaller classes and a more overtly competitive style of teaching than are found in schools. They are cram schools of different levels, geared toward improving students’ performances on the high school entrance examinations. After-school classes that children take in sports or art are also called *juku*.

The willingness of most parents to pay noticeable amounts of money for tutoring in commercial establishments, which make extensive use of repeated, indeed tedious, testing and ranking, indicates that parents think this activity is important. The crucial importance of placement in high schools as a determiner of the options available to students for the rest of their lives is well known to all Japanese parents and adults. Grades and teacher recommendations have nothing to do with the process, only the results of the high school entrance examinations. High schools are ranked by the test achievement levels of their entering students, which in turn are directly linked to the university entrance success or the employment success of their graduates. In one sense, looking at the situation from outside, it seems that gaining admission to a particular high school only predicts, more or less, a student’s success in gaining admission to a particular college later on, or in obtaining employment with certain employers. Japanese participants in the process, however, act as though getting over the high school
entrance barrier definitely determines their ability to get over the next college or employment entrance barrier.

The issue of high school admission is complicated, and it varies somewhat from one part of Japan to another, but it can be briefly described as follows: high school is not part of the compulsory school requirement in Japan; the legal school-leaving age is after finishing ninth grade. However, about 95 percent of Japanese children do enter high school, and nearly all of them graduate. About 30 percent of high school students attend private schools; the rest are in public schools. Both public and private schools charge fees, and both require students to take entrance examinations. There are several vocational curricula, as well as general academic and college preparatory academic programs. Within a school jurisdiction, which may be as large as a prefecture, there are no residence requirements for attending a particular high school, so schools choose entrants on the basis of their examination scores. The result of this process is that all the students in a high school are academically very similar—in strong contrast to students in the untracked compulsory levels of school. Because the student bodies of individual high schools are academically very similar when they enter, it is not too surprising that they are academically very similar when they graduate. The ranking of public and private high schools in terms of the examination scores of their new students, and in terms of the college and employment placements of their graduates, is widely known by the general population and by teachers and parents.

There is a contradiction between the importance of authoritative evaluations of academic performance in juku and in entrance examinations and their absence in the institutional setting of elementary schools. The situations in which “authorities,” either the juku and testing services or the high schools in giving entrance examinations, evaluate student performance are resolutely separated from the elementary school context itself; I think they are viewed as antithetical to the social values and relationships that schools are entrusted with
teaching. Schools and teachers feel, and say, that *juku* are inappropriate for children, unhealthy and unnecessary. The examinations for high school entrance (and later university entrance) are felt to be like an external foe, against which students and teachers alike struggle for success. These evaluations and rankings are not something imposed by teachers on students. Teachers teach; they do not evaluate, and they do not hold their students' fates in their hands directly.