Japanese Lessons

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The Three R’s,
Japanese Style

In Japan as in most countries, reading, writing, and arithmetic form the academic core of elementary school, along with science and social studies. It would be hard to tell that from the textbooks, however. On the first day, when Sam and Ellen received their books, we were surprised by the number of textbooks given to them and also by their appearance.

We were used to having no texts for subjects like art and physical education and having textbooks for the basic subjects that in their size and weight seem to embody physically the importance of their subject matter. American textbooks tend to be hardcover, thick, large-format books intended to last for several years. They do not belong to students in our children’s schools but to the school; they are loaned to the children, who are supposed to return them in pristine condition.

The Japanese texts are thin, small paperbacks, nicely printed on good paper, which belong to students. The texts for reading, writing, and arithmetic are no larger or thicker than those for art, home economics, and physical education. My initial reaction was that there just wasn’t enough material in these texts to keep a class occupied for a whole year. In fact, for reading and arithmetic there are two text volumes for each year, but they still add up to a very modest number of
pages, compared to American textbooks. It seemed that teachers would have to do a lot of extra work to stretch these texts into a year’s worth of work.

As I thought about American textbooks and reflected on conversations I had had with curriculum developers in the United States, especially some people involved with the New Math and the Basic Course in Biological Science curricula, each intended to introduce sweeping changes in the way these subjects were taught in U.S. schools, I remembered a basic distrust of the classroom teacher that pervaded those conversations. I think the elaborate textbooks of American publishers are designed to be teacher-proof: to have so much material, so many teaching aids, so many different exercises and problems, that even a bad teacher can’t distort the material being presented. Because the understanding and teaching skills of the classroom teacher can’t be relied on, the textbooks have to provide all the material, to be almost self-teaching, programmed instruction materials. (Incidentally, since these textbooks free students’ learning from dependence on the teacher, they also free learning from classroom interaction and make learning a solitary, individual activity. This conception is basically opposed to Japanese notions of where and how learning best takes place.)

From watching classes and from talking with teachers and parents, I learned that Japanese elementary school classes in the basic academic subjects are very much textbook centered and that using the textbook constitutes a good part of every day’s class in these subjects. I decided to look at the books to see just what was in them that could absorb so much time.

**Reading**

Learning to read and write is the foundation for all other academic skills, and learning to read Japanese is not easy. (See the appendix for an explanation of what is involved.) Reading as a mechanical process is very difficult because of the Japanese writing system, and learning to
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read as an intellectual process extending beyond the mechanics is as difficult as in any other language. Because of the writing system, writing in the sense of being able to inscribe words on paper, on the conceptual level of penmanship and spelling, is also difficult and requires effort throughout the elementary school years. Writing in the sense of composition of effective communication in various formats is also learned in Japanese schools, starting in first grade, and is as difficult as writing in this sense in English or other languages.

All these skills are encompassed in the subject known as kokugo, "national language." This name derives from the historical period when standardization of the writing system and spread of a standard Tokyo-based dialect were aims of the education system. Now that these objectives have been accomplished, the name remains and may have some overtones that emphasize the uniqueness of the Japanese people and the Japanese language.

For first graders there are two textbook readers, two writing workbooks, one calligraphy text, and two workbooks that provide the basic material for reading and writing for the year. For Ellen's class there was also a drill book that the teacher had students purchase each term and exercise books for homework.

The first-grade text stories range in length from the first of 30 words in nine sentences, to one of the last, which is 425 words long. Most are fiction, but there are some poetry and nonfiction entries. Each story is followed by discussion questions and exercises. Many of the exercises deal with Japanese grammar, and especially the formation of the full-sentence forms appropriate for written Japanese as opposed to the more elliptical forms used in much of spoken Japanese. Children begin writing "compositions" using these sentence formulas from the beginning of first grade.

During class time major emphasis is placed on reading aloud, and the whole class in unison or in small groups or as individuals read the text out loud over and over. Not only is the accurate pronunciation of written words a goal, but reading in a fluent and expressive style is
emphasized also. Children are not considered to have learned to read a story until they can do a polished performance of it.

The never-changing homework for *kokugo* in Ellen’s class was daily reading aloud at home. The teacher prepared a special checkoff sheet for each story of the text. Spaces were provided on the sheet for an older person at home to grade each day’s reading on the following factors:

1. not mumbling, clear words, to the end
2. using a clear voice that can be heard throughout the room
3. separating words correctly, leaving pauses in between
4. using a speed for easy comprehension
5. using appropriate expression for people and animals in stories.

The parent, grandparent, or older sibling who helped with this homework each day was supposed to mark each day’s grades with a stamp (equivalent to a signature); the teacher also marked each day’s entry with her stamp to indicate she had seen it. In addition, she sent home to the student and the helper complimentary, encouraging, or scolding notes on effort and perseverance.

First grade incorporates a lot of practice of the mechanics of writing. The required calligraphy and reading workbooks give children exercises and repetitive practice in writing, of both the syllabic characters and of *kanji* (ideographs). In many cases children are expected to do ten to thirty repetitions of the same symbol. There is strong emphasis on standard form, not merely on intelligibility. The space in which a symbol is to be written is divided into four quadrants, for instance, and the same proportions of length, curve, and so forth are to be copied and maintained in each repetition of the symbol.

Until the advent of word processors, all Japanese was either printed at printing presses or hand written, and a standard penmanship, one that did not encompass vagaries of personality or personal style, was
important. Even now, I think, Japanese would regard idiosyncratic handwriting as a sign of rampant, "selfish" individualism in its pejorative sense—unless, of course, calligraphy as an art form is involved. Here, the expression of individuality and personality is entirely appropriate—so appropriate that many Japanese cannot read what is written in this "art form." The writing done at school is not meant to be like this.

For first graders, another daily practice in writing is the preparation of the renrakuchō. This is a book in which children write their daily assignments and other information that the teacher wants to reach each home: notes about plans for future projects, equipment, or money required, for instance, or exhortations about getting to school wasuremono nai yo ni, "without any forgotten things." (I thought this was only our problem for a long time, but I've come to think it was a problem in many homes, and not just in first grade.) The teacher's message amounts to two or three sentences a day copied from the board, where the teacher writes it at a pace a quick student could keep up with. The fact that this information is needed at home means that parents join in the pressure to produce intelligible writing. Parents must stamp the message each day and can use the booklet to send messages back to the teacher. She also stamps it each day to indicate she has seen it.

Ellen also brought home many drawings that, like the drawings in the reading text, included writing on the same page. Her writings here were more than just captions, often several sentences, and by the end of her time in Japan, the writing was exclusively in Japanese. (She continued to answer some questions in English in her homework book and other contexts.) In the third term of first grade students were required to make and keep a book of reflections on school life, which they handed in periodically and which the teacher reviewed.

Both Sam and Ellen seemed to enjoy writing and the calligraphy classes in school. They seemed especially proud of the writing they did
at kakizome. Kakizome is a ceremony held just after New Year’s in which writing is done “for the first time” that year. The emperor invites noted calligraphers and authors to a party for this activity, and their “writings” as well as the emperor’s are published in newspapers and shown on television news reports. Schoolchildren are assigned a phrase or a passage to practice for their own ceremonial “first writing” at school after the New Year’s vacation. Children all gather in the school gymnasium for this school activity, and their writings are exhibited in the school hallways during January. Ellen and Sam worked on their calligraphy over the vacation and produced quite respectable writings for kakizome.

All the writing that first graders do, and most of their reading, is in the vertical format, with lines running from top to bottom of the page, the first line at the right-hand side of the page. Some texts, science and social studies, have horizontal writing in a Western format. In my experience it is not trivial to change from one of these formats to the other, in terms of eye movements and patterns of grouping word or phrase units together for fluent comprehension. Though Japanese students learn to handle both from the beginning of first grade, they are given more practice in the vertical format.

In reading classes, even through the sixth-grade level, reading of the assigned text out loud is an important and standard part of class time. This is because, as explained in the appendix on the writing system, the relationship between the symbols of Japanese writing and the sounds of words of Japanese is far from straightforward. Repetition and practice are necessary to make these connections easy for learners. It’s possible to skip this step, so some incentive to include it is necessary for learners. What I mean is that it is possible in the Japanese writing system to move directly from the written symbol to the meaning, without knowing the actual spoken “word” that the symbol stands for. Kanji are identical in form and meaning to Chinese ideographs in many cases. I studied Chinese before learning Japanese, and there are many
situations in which I can figure out what some written Japanese means without being able to read most of it out loud. Japanese children, however, are expected to be able to associate spoken words with symbols, and reading aloud provides the practice for doing this.

A student taking a turn at reading is expected to stand beside the desk, adopt a formal posture, and read in a loud, clear, expressive voice. This was more likely to be accomplished after a period of work on the story; it was not done so well on the first days of a unit, when just getting through the sentences with correct pronunciation of the words written in kanji was difficult for many students. One sixth-grade teacher did not insist that students stand for reading aloud on the first day of a unit that I observed.

This teacher introduced the new unit by asking those students who had not read ahead to think about the title of the story and the pictures in the text and speculate on what the story would be like. He was insistent that only students who had not already read the story should respond; the effect, it seemed to me, was to disparage the initiative of the students who had gone ahead of the class rather than reading the story with everyone else. Students seemed reluctant to give responses to this questioning. Partly, the teacher said later, that was because of my presence, but also because the older students are always more shy than the younger ones. Gaining a sense of reserve is seen as a sign of maturity in Japan, so while teachers may enjoy the enthusiasm of younger students, they expect and do not disapprove of more restrained response from the older ones.

Although this was the first day of a new unit, and the mechanics of reading the story absorbed much of the energy of the class, the teacher’s discussion beforehand pointed out some aspects of the structure of the story, that it was a “story within a story” and that observing the transitions from one part to the next was crucial, as was the question of how much of the inner story should be considered fantasy. Other activities I observed in reading classes included discussions of
the characters, the situations, the students' reactions, and the literary structure of the story. Sometimes the teacher asked specific content questions about the story.

By fifth and sixth grades many American students are reading relatively long books that could be considered "literature" rather than texts. The transition from short pieces mostly read aloud to long works read silently and individually takes place around fourth grade in many American schools. After this, only poetry and plays are read aloud. In Japan, even in the upper grades stories in the texts continue to be relatively short units that can be approached in such a way as to become polished, read-aloud performances. By third grade the reading texts are written without divisions between words, as are texts for adults, giving an added complication to smooth comprehension in reading silently or aloud. It seems that comprehension is judged by how well that comprehension can be orally communicated to others. Some poems in the fifth-grade text are marked with suggestions for reading—where to increase or decrease volume, where to speed up or slow down, and tones of voice to incorporate. Even prose descriptive passages are to be read "so that the mood and description of the place are clearly conveyed to the listener."

All classes included some reading aloud, but in classes that came at later points in a unit, other analysis was more emphasized. One lesson for sixth graders near the end of a unit was focused on outlining the story, a biography. Here the class was notable for the small amount of time spent reading aloud and the large amount of time spent silently with each person working on an outline, under the general guidance of the teacher. His talk was repetitious, emphasizing the major headings of an outline of this story, pointing out what was overtly mentioned in the text and what had to be deduced. He left large stretches of time for students to work in their notebooks on an outline, but he also wrote on the board and ended up with an elaborate, elegant outline in four colors of chalk.
Fifth and sixth graders, too, have workbooks and drill books for writing practice. For them the emphasis is on the new kanji they are learning, but repetition and careful following of a standard writing pattern is just as important as in first grade. A weekly lesson in calligraphy, using a brush to write kanji, is also part of the curriculum at this level. This is the first step to calligraphy as an art form, but there are also social contexts in Japanese life in which writing with a pencil or pen would be inappropriate—only brush writing will do.

They also practice composition in various formats: book reports, expository writing, preparing reports in science or social studies, and writing letters and essays. As noted elsewhere, many classes end with students writing a summary or a reflection on the material of the class. These are often read aloud to the whole class.

Elaine Gerbert (1993) has written a content analysis of Japanese kokugo textbooks that emphasizes the differences between them and current American texts. She also notes the sheer volume of materials in the American texts, which are two to three times as long as their Japanese counterparts. Often American teachers do not use all the material in a text but choose to omit certain parts. In Japan all the material in a text is used because the required curriculum will not be covered if parts are omitted. In Japan the content of the texts remains relatively constant, so that a college student working with me who saw a second-grade text story said, “Oh, I remember that story.” Some shifts in focus have taken place in Japanese texts, but not to the extent that American texts have been overhauled in recent years.

Gerbert sees an important source of variety in the American texts in the many literary forms that are included. A Japanese text for fourth graders incorporates seventeen units in eight genres, ranging from poetry through stories and biography to a report on an experiment. A fourth-grade text for Americans contains forty-nine units in eighteen genres, including autobiography, a photo essay, and a play, for instance.
American texts emphasize the diversity of peoples in the United States and the diversity of their conditions. Such variation is treated as valuable in and of itself, as well as worthwhile because it portrays challenges and opportunities for individuals in American society. The appreciation of individuality in diverse and difficult situations is a major theme in these texts, Gerbert says. (My reading of some texts confirms this; it would appear from the textbooks that there are no nonhyphenated, white children without handicaps living in intact employed families in America.) Life as presented in these texts is fairly dramatic—important events spur people on to major changes in life; introspection and quiet reflection are rare events. History is presented as full of conflict, and moral evaluations of historical events and movements is overt, as is principled moral evaluation of actions in other stories. Stories about nature either anthropomorphize animals or present humans intervening to conquer or improve nature. Activities associated with the reading texts ask students to develop analytical skills—to understand and evaluate the structure of arguments; to distinguish among fact, fiction, opinion, and fantasy; to discuss hypothetical situations; and to make overt judgments of literary and moral merit.

In the Japanese texts nearly all situations presented are familiar, comforting, safe situations. The interior life of the characters in the story, often rather generic narrators, is emphasized more than events in the social or real world in which the characters live. A fifth-grade story about a boy’s birthday talks about his anticipation of the day and his excitement, but the focal event turns out to be his watching a single perfect leaf falling from a tree, an event he observes in solitude. Stories with more distant settings in time and space are most often inspirational biographies.

A significant number of units deal with a close, empathetic observation and understanding of familiar natural phenomena. Human action seldom intrudes in these observations, and the atmosphere is not one that emphasizes the mystery or awe of Nature, but the intimacy of humans and natural events. There seems to be a preference for obser-
vations of small things, insects and small plants, for instance, rather than of larger or more sweeping aspects of nature. Both a conventionalyzed and a real appreciation of immediate natural phenomena is an important part of the Japanese literary tradition and of modern everyday writing. All letters, newsletters, announcements, and so forth make an initial reference to the season of the communication by mentioning plants and animals and natural events that are thought to characterize the time of year.

Some potentially salient characteristics of characters or narrators in these *kokugo* text units are nearly completely ignored. Differences between people based on social categories, such as occupation, region, income, gender, religion, age, disabilities, or even talents, are not presented as background or made the focus of situations in the stories. These are the characteristics that are made central in stories in the American texts.

Gerbert does not mention one of the striking features of the Japanese texts. In those books illustrated with drawings rather than photographs, the children and adults depicted do not look physically Japanese. This occurs not just once in a while but very consistently. Most noticeably, the coloring of their hair does not match the range of black and near-black hues found in Japan. Instead, most people, both adults and children, are shown with brown, light brown, and even almost blond hair. Eyes are drawn in a way to de-emphasize the epicanthic fold, which is nearly universal in Japan. These illustrations occur with stories that are set in Japan and are about Japanese characters. If photographs are used, they are accurate, showing black-haired children with a variety of eye shapes, nose shapes, and face shapes.

The producers of children’s literature in America have felt it was important for children to find people “like themselves” in the illustrations. Perhaps as an American observer of that emphasis, I am overly sensitive to the anomaly of textbooks that systematically portray Asians as though they were Caucasians. Illustrations of stories set in historical times consistently show people with stronger Japanese coloring.
Japanese to whom I have mentioned this observation do not seem to find the phenomenon interesting, saying only that it makes for "prettier" or "more interesting" illustrations. I don't think the Japanese suffer from an unhealthy desire to be physically different than they are, but this style of portrayal is too widespread to be accidental or to be ignored.

The same pattern can be found in children's books that are not schoolbooks, but it is much stronger in the textbooks. When it is found in advertisements, the usual interpretation is that the use of Western or Western-looking models imparts an air of modernity and glamour to a product. Could this be an attempt to make Japanese textbooks more "international" by understating physical differences between Japanese and other nationalities?

The Ministry of Education controls the textbooks used in public schools, not just for reading but for all subjects. The ministry publishes a detailed national curriculum for each grade and each subject, and texts must cover all the material prescribed by the ministry. Textbooks prepared by about six publishing companies are submitted for approval by the ministry, which controls the format and the content of the texts. Local school boards at the prefectural or city level then choose among the approved text series for a set of texts to be used in that jurisdiction.

There is almost no educational or political objection to this system of text control. The only area in which there are political objections is in the treatment of Japanese history in high school texts, in the sections dealing with the history of Japan in the decades of military and colonial expansion and with the actions of Japan during the Second World War. Protests against a presentation of events in those years that is seen as denying, mitigating, or excusing Japan's actions come from the political left in Japan and equally from the governments of nations that were occupied or conquered by Japan. These textbooks have become a political issue both domestically and internationally. But at the elementary school level the texts are not controversial and seem to inspire little or no discussion.
ARITHMETIC

Here, surely, the textbooks must be really different from American ones—everyone knows that Japanese students are the most proficient in the world at mathematics. But no, these too are soft, friendly-looking little paperbacks.

The first-grade text is 109 pages for the whole year. There are seventeen units and four review sections for the forty weeks of school. A unit on telling time by the hour and the half hour contains only two pages of text, though as I remember it, Ellen's class spent several days on this topic. The unit on adding single digits with a sum greater than ten is eight pages long and contains only fifty-eight practice problems to solve. This unit involves learning thirty-six arithmetic "facts" (for example, $7 + 8 = 15$), and students were expected to be able to explain a procedure for the addition and produce quick memorized answers for these problems. Fifty-eight practice problems won't produce world-class proficiency. These problems are used in class with physical counters to illustrate the procedure of the addition and to check answers by counting. A lot of time is taken up by the actual manipulation of the objects and counting. The learning that goes on in class is both concrete, because of the visual and tactile stimuli involved, and abstract, because of the generalized procedure for understanding that is used.

Though little class time is spent in practice, there are several devices to encourage it. First, a number of games involving practice can be done in class: cards with problems are laid out on a table for a group of children, and they take turns answering them, scoring points for correct problems. Other games with dice also are suggested. For practice at home, each child has a set of flash cards for addition and another for subtraction and work books that are purchased at bookstores. The first-grade workbook for addition offers twenty-four pages of practice problems for this unit, totaling more than three hundred problems. A
prize of a colored sticker is provided for each page that is perfectly solved; no time limit is given. This workbook is not homework, taken to school to be presented to the teacher; it is a study aid for home. At school, however, teachers quiz students at odd times, while they are getting ready to go home, for instance, so that children know they are expected to gain quick mastery of the "facts," as well as of the principles that are the focus of teaching time. American observers of Japanese mathematics classes have often commented on the time teachers are willing to give to concrete physical operations that clarify mathematical operations and concepts. Much more emphasis in class is placed on this than on getting through a large number of problems. As reported by Stevenson and Stigler (1992:192f.) and other observers, mistakes are treated as teaching opportunities, not ignored or passed over quickly. Since teachers place an emphasis on finding as many ways to solve a problem as possible, classes often consider several strategies. The teaching style suggests that knowing why a suggestion that turns out not to work didn't work is as important as memorizing a procedure that is correct. Again, Lewis (1995) reports on an incident that illustrates both the social and the academic approaches to mathematics learning in elementary schools.

A second-grade class was working on ways to solve the following problem: seven children were riding in a train car; two got off, and then three more got on. How many children were then riding on the train? Equations to represent the problem, not the "answer," were what students were expected to give. Among the equations offered were one boy's set, \(3 - 2 = 1\) and \(1 + 7 = 8\). When he was asked to explain his thinking, however, he tried for several minutes but couldn't. The teacher asked if other children could figure out what he was thinking about as he wrote these, but no one could, and the general feeling was that the equations were wrong. After giving the boy another chance to explain, the teacher suggested that he touch her hand to transfer his power of thinking to her, so that she could explain. She did so, leading the class through the reasoning that makes these
equations a correct statement of the problem, although they were not
the only correct solution and not the only one dealt with during the
class. At the end of class she asked the boy how he felt when everyone
thought his answer was wrong. He replied, “I didn’t feel good.” “I
think he was very brave to try to explain when everyone disagreed,”
said the teacher. Brave enough that the whole class, agreeing,

In general, Japanese students think math is hard, taking a lot of
work and study, but they feel confident of their ability to learn it.
Adults agree with children—that the learning is demanding but within
their reach. By the end of first grade, children have learned cardinal
and ordinal numbers through one hundred, can add and subtract
numbers up to one hundred without borrowing or carrying, can tell
time, can do simple measurements and comparisons of length, and can
name several geometric figures.

In fifth grade the emphasis continues to be on a few examples,
worked out in the most concrete way possible, and a few practice
problems offered in the text. A unit on measuring the volume of rec-
tangular solids, for instance, includes eleven pages of text, nine exam-
pies fully worked out in the text, and about fifteen practice problems.
In the last set of problems, students are asked to deal with displace-
ment measurement of an egg, and the problem is followed by a page
explaining Archimedes’ discovery of this principle of measurement. A
class would spend about two weeks on this unit. More problems, to
offer practice in the principles emphasized in the text materials, can be
found in the drill books that students purchase to accompany the text.
The time in class is devoted to discussion of ways to solve the problems
and analysis of the errors in thinking in possible solutions that turn out
not to work.

Harold W. Stevenson and James W. Stigler (1992; Stigler et al.
1987) have conducted several studies to analyze differences in teach-
ing styles between Japan and the United States, including differences
in ways of teaching mathematics, where the divergence in test results
between the two countries is the most striking. Among the consistent differences they report are greater coherence, greater concreteness, and more thoroughness of the Japanese teacher’s lessons. A fifth-grade class they report on (1992:177–78), for instance, was designed to teach the use of bar graphs in analyzing data. It began with the teacher bringing into class six different containers, including a pitcher, a vase, and a beer bottle (much laughter), and wondering aloud which would hold the most. Animated class discussion led pupils to decide they had to fill the different containers with water, using a common drinking cup as the standard measure. A bucket of water from the wash basins outside was brought in, and each han group was given one of the containers to fill with measured water. The teacher wrote the names of the containers on the blackboard in a column and a scale of cup measurements across the width of the blackboard. She then asked each group how many drinking cups of water their container held and drew lines to the appropriate place on the scale. Again she asked, “Which one holds the most water?” and led the class to arrange the containers in rank order, relating this to the bar graph. After leading the class in a review of the procedure they had used to solve the problem, she mentioned the specific terms that are used for the vertical and horizontal axes of the graph. It was a lesson in drawing graphs, but the emphasis was on using one to solve a problem, not on abstract discussion of the properties of graphs—and even for fifth graders, humor and water play were part of the lesson.

Stevenson and Stigler’s extensive observations showed that Japanese teachers usually begin lessons with practical problems to be solved, that they are often willing to give an entire class to working on one problem, and that they shape coherence through the problems and explicit summaries of what principles have been used to solve them. Merely getting through a lot of problems to correct answers is not part of the classroom program of teaching mathematics.

Again, the picture I expected of docile, quiet Japanese students plodding through reams of repetitive problems, becoming computa-
ional wizards with no notion of the meaning of the problems they were dealing with, turned out to be a fiction dispelled by seeing what goes on in Japanese classrooms and by looking at the teaching materials Japanese children are exposed to. Sam and Ellen found mathematics hard. Sam had trouble following the discussions that led to understanding in his classes because of the language problem, and he wasn’t accustomed to depending on us for help with schoolwork. The pace of material was difficult for Ellen. It was too easy not to do the drill work at home that led to computational proficiency. Ellen’s mother did not learn until the year was almost over that her job included coaxing and participating in practice activities to solidify the understanding of mathematics that comes in the classroom.

Japanese students consider math hard, too. In their case there is nearly always a mother at home who went through Japanese schools herself and who knows what kind of studying it takes to keep up with the curriculum, who reinforces the importance of doing so, and who expects to be a mathematics coach during after-school hours—or who sends her children to a private tutor or *juku* for help and drilling.

In spite of the school principal’s advice to us that he did not think a tutor in Japanese for Sam and Ellen would be necessary, in retrospect I think we should have hired a college student to help Sam with his schoolwork, and I should have spent more time with Ellen on her work. But I felt pretty sorry for Sam and Ellen, who were already spending forty hours a week or more in school, and was reluctant to increase their burden. I usually didn’t feel like doing homework in the evenings myself, either.

**Social Studies**

Social Studies is one of the most ideological subjects in the curriculum of modern nations. Here, the educators of all countries agree, children learn “facts” not only about their own social world, but about the social worlds of people in other times and places. The history children
learn about their own country and others is a story that places social facts in a framework for interpretation, and both governments and families care deeply about the interpretation presented to children and absorbed in this subject at school.

That being the case, it was instructive to see the materials that are used in Japanese social studies classes and texts and to compare those with the corresponding American materials. The first-grade curriculum is organized around the theme of the social life of the school. School does become for Japanese children a social life nearly complete in itself and thus is a social world in microcosm in ways it probably is not for American students. The textbook is a large picture book with very little text, and the captions for pictures are phrased as comments that seem to come from children looking at the pictures. The illustrations are both drawings and photographs, sometimes mixed on the same page.

The introductory unit is "New Friends" and features drawings of first graders in several school settings: on the playground, entering the classroom, and presenting their self-portraits to be hung on the bulletin board. The pictures include teachers, but children are more central. The physical features of the classroom and school yard are prominent. Like the curriculum, these are nearly uniform for the whole country of Japan.

Unit 1, "Our School," moves in pictures through activities that the whole school participates in, such as school assembly, to specialized activities and their spaces—the orchestra room, the library, the teachers' room, and others. There is a picture to stimulate discussion on school equipment that everyone shares and school equipment that is the same for everyone but is individually owned. A second unit, "School Workers," illustrates the roles of teachers, the school nurse, the kitchen workers, and the maintenance men.

The third unit, entitled "Summer Has Come," marks the end of the first third of the school year and discusses the special activities of summer and its special foods and clothing. It emphasizes the contrasts between summer and winter. The fourth unit is about a neighborhood
park, picturing the many activities that take place there, the facilities that are there to be shared, and the many different kinds of people who use the park. There seems to be a parallel drawn between the school world presented in the first unit, with its varied public and private facets, and the public park.

The next unit, “Roads to School,” looks at other features of the surrounding neighborhood. The pictures are rich in detail (and Japanese towns all look enough alike that they will be familiar to everyone), and the artistic perspectives that are used to portray the scenes are complicated, sometimes overhead looking down, viewpoints that seem to be designed to lead into map making—and that is the activity of the first graders shown on the last page of the unit, construction of a large map on the floor of the classroom. Traffic safety in traveling through the neighborhood is also emphasized.

A unit called “Work at Home” presents a fairly sexist view of the division of labor in a “typical” family: an employed father, a mother apparently not employed outside the home (though about half the mothers of elementary school children are employed [Japan Institute of Labour 1989:72]), a grandmother, and two children. Some attempt to step outside the usual sex role typing of household jobs can be seen, as when the father and the son dry the dishes the mother is washing, or when the father hands a plate of food to someone, but generally, the mother’s work is housework and the father’s work is invisibly somewhere else.

Ellen said that when this unit was going on, each han group constituted itself as a family—she was the little sister—and acted out many different activities. I remember being irritated at the requests for household equipment to be sent to school: a vacuum cleaner, a mop, a pail and rags, dishes, and pots and pans. They even did laundry at school for this unit, including ironing and folding clothes. Talking about household tasks is not as good a learning tool as doing them, in the view of the Japanese teachers. A notion made explicit in this unit is that school is the work of children. Just as their mothers cook, shop,
and clean, and their fathers go to work and fix things around the house, children go to school and study. The end of the second term comes at the beginning of winter, and the unit "Seasons and Life" is another opportunity to stress the changing activities correlated with the seasons of the year.

The last long unit of the year is entitled "Since I Was Born . . ." and talks about the changes in physical and social abilities that each child has experienced since birth. Pictures of children at different ages are brought from home for posters, along with clothes, toys, and family reminiscences, to make concrete the changes that have taken place. Into this schema are put all the many experiences of the first grade that have contributed to children's growing up, things like Sports Day, the school excursion, the entering ceremony, and swimming lessons. The conclusion points out that "Soon We'll Be Second Graders." Like the seeds of morning glories, first graders have grown and changed, and they are about to enter a new stage of life as second graders.

Several standard American social studies curricula also take as their starting points the social life of school, the family as a social unit, and the personal development of children from birth to first grade. But the American curriculum for the year also includes a number of other topics—a little history, usually related to holidays like Thanksgiving and Martin Luther King, Jr., Day, and definitions of basic human needs and wants, explicit consideration of rules that characterize families, schools, and neighborhoods, and pictures of unifying places and symbols for the whole nation: the Capitol, the White House, the Statue of Liberty, Mount Rushmore. In all of this there is an overt emphasis on variety of people and forms for living in groups. Each unit, on housing for instance, or meals, gives pictures of scenes from other countries (Japan, Norway, India, and Nigeria in one text series).

Within the United States the variety of physical types, ethnic backgrounds, family forms, and individuality are emphasized. Differences in living patterns in cities, suburbs, and rural areas are pointed out, and the fact that the food in the local store comes from many different
places. It looks as though conscious effort has gone into choosing pictures that break possible stereotypes about gender, race, and ethnic patterns in occupations and activities and that show people with disabilities doing possibly unexpected things.

Perhaps because the United States is more varied than Japan in terms of geography, settlement patterns, and architectural environment, the pictures in the U.S. texts seem more abstract and less realistic than those in Japanese texts, where for an American reader at least, part of the delight in looking at the pictures comes from recognizing features one has seen in one's own neighborhood and all over Japan. I've traveled all over the United States, too, and the drawings in the American texts look like no places I've ever seen, in contrast to the photos, which are readily identifiable.

American children are presented in the first-grade curriculum in social studies with a world that has greater time depth, more connection with the world outside, and more variety and complex structures within their own country than the world shown to Japanese children. The text is much more verbal, with significant written passages that seem to be beyond the reading level of many or most first graders. The text and other material are more complex and difficult than the materials for Japanese first graders; they are noticeably more abstract, less connected with daily life and personal experience.

In Japan fifth graders study Japan, and in the United States many fifth graders study the United States. In Japan the two small fifth-grade texts for the year are supplemented with a glossy, handsome atlas full of maps, charts, and graphs and a grim, gray study guide. Five units for the year cover agriculture, fisheries, manufacturing and traditional crafts in Japan, and the land forms and climatic patterns of Japan. The written material in the textbooks is quite informal in style, and the meat of the content seems to be in the many visual presentations of data in the atlas. Only in the section on agriculture is any historical perspective given. In this unit changes in the last forty years as Japanese agriculture has become more mechanized are highlighted.
Family sketches of the activities and income of both a full-time farming household and a part-time farming household are presented. What is striking about these sketches is how full of quantitative data they are. Not only does the text say that transplanting rice seedlings used to be more time-consuming, but it also specifies that forty years ago it took five people ten days and now it takes one person one day. Charts, graphs, and pictures make more quantitative comparisons having to do with plowing, harvesting, and other activities.

The feelings and atmosphere of farm life are also presented, however, in terms of the things farmers worry about—the weather, mainly, and whether they have made the right decisions about seed variety, fertilizer, and timing. The anxiety of having all one’s efforts and income dependent on one harvest, which is affected by many factors farmers can’t control, is discussed. The section on agriculture is the only one presented in such human detail, however; the sections on fisheries and manufactures don’t have this kind of humanized approach.

Possibly this is because Japan was only recently a country where most people were engaged in agriculture. In 1960 almost a third of all Japanese households were engaged in agriculture, full or part time. Add to this Japanese with relatives who are farmers, and a large part of the total population is included. The number of people in agriculture is steadily declining, but farmers remain an important political and cultural force in Japan.

The atlas used by fifth graders is notable for the quality of the printing and production, the lavish use of color and color photography, and mostly for the sheer amount of data that is presented in chart and graph form. Being able to digest and comprehend data presented in this way is a sophisticated accomplishment.

A general overall impression of the text materials for Americans and Japanese in social studies is that the American material is mostly words, with a few charts and pictures, and the Japanese material is much more heavily visual, with data presented in charts and graphs, some quite complicated, rather than in prose. A lot of interpretation is necessary,
and is discussed in class, to make these charts and graphs meaningful. A great deal of information is packed into this mode of presentation, an overwhelming amount, it seems to me.

What the words of the American fifth-grade texts talk about is the history of the United States. The time period dealt with is from 40,000 years ago through the Cold War, the first landing on the moon, Martin Luther King, Jr., the Civil Rights movement, the Cuban Missile crisis, and the Vietnam War. (Experience suggests that most classes don't get through all this material, and it's the modern period that is usually omitted.) Though the text does not go into vivid detail, there is continuous reference to the conflicts between groups and interests that have characterized American history. Separate sections, nearly a half of the text, deal with the geography of regions of the United States. Also included are chapters on the history and geography of Mexico and Canada.

The American material is much broader in historical and social scope than the Japanese fifth-grade material; the Japanese material is much more thorough and analytical. The American material is more overtly ideological, in that it presents a view of America that emphasizes a particular interpretation of American history and resources, specifically, an interpretation that promotes patriotism and identification with a set of social and political goals for the United States. No such material is found in the Japanese text.

In both countries the materials in social studies curricula are potentially politically contentious, but the policy in America has been to recognize the importance of this part of school for citizenship learning and to present a consensus view of the United States. In Japan the response has been to eliminate the overt political content and present more "factual" material, with little or no social or political interpretation.

Other areas of political socialization are handled differently in the two countries, too. The ritual of saying the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag is a normal part of American school life, and its purpose, to make children feel like united American citizens, is recognized and accepted.
Patriotic songs, such as "The Star-Spangled Banner," "America the Beautiful," and "My Country, 'Tis of Thee," are used in U.S. schools with no protest. The national flag is displayed prominently in several locations in schools both public and private, and no one seems to think this is inappropriate.

In Japan, however, where since the end of the Second World War teachers have been a leftish political group and opposed to many policies of the rightish Ministry of Education, the display of the national flag in schools has been opposed and minimized; many teachers refuse to teach or sing the national anthem (actually a song to the emperor that is not quite the official anthem but the closest thing to it Japan has) or other patriotic music. School texts do not present material related to the national holidays of Japan, some of which have political significance. Among these are the Emperor's Birthday, Constitution Day, and Accession Day, which commemorates the first (mythical) Japanese emperor.

Religion, religious symbols and holidays, prayer, and moral values that many Americans identify with religion are perennial sources of contention in American schools and on both the local and national political scene. Nationalism in the schools is an issue that emerges only sporadically, as when high school students in the late 1960s wore black armbands to protest the Vietnam war, or when some students on religious grounds decline to say the Pledge of Allegiance. Nationalism in Japanese schools is an ongoing political issue in Japan, but religion is not. The social studies curriculum in each country reflects that country's orientations to social problems. The curriculum of American schools is overtly political and religiously "neutral." The curriculum of Japanese schools is politically "neutral" on the issue of nationalism and less indoctrinating than the U.S. curriculum.