Japanese Lessons

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Published by NYU Press

Benjamin, Gail R.
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The end of an ethnography such as this one calls for a summary of themes and motifs, of general coherence in the cultural phenomena described. If we understand the goals and the constraining environment of Japanese elementary school education, we will be able to understand why certain practices are widespread and effective.

In addition, in an ethnography like this one, undertaken in part to compare the education systems of Japan and the United States, it is appropriate to pull together some comparisons of practices in the two countries with an eye to evaluating possible changes in American practice. Both institutional structures and conceptions of children’s motivations for learning are foci for evaluating changes.

We can look at the results of the practices of schools and at the structural and psychological foundations of those practices. It seems to me crucial to understand that in Japan the social practices of schools provide learning for social behaviors that remain useful in adult life and that achievable levels of success in school lead to successful lives after leaving school. The institutional format of uniform national standards for elementary school education, the relationship between teachers and students that follows from that, and the motivations for learning that Japanese teachers assume will operate in children are keys to making sense of the ethnographic detail.
In terms of the daily, yearly experience of being a child at school, I think the Japanese schools provide psychologically supportive, intellectually challenging, socially satisfying environments. Japanese children are happy at school; they learn a lot; they make friends with peers and learn to interact with them in culturally appropriate ways. What they learn at school academically and socially is useful to them in life after school; there are no major contradictions between the lessons of school and those of life in Japan, and they are appropriate at all social and class levels.

Sometimes the close parallels between the behavior patterns Japanese learn at school and the situations they confront as adults seem trivial, sometimes pervasive and profound. Even Sports Day, a school ritual, is often repeated in adult organizations such as companies. The same games and events are found at sports days for adults as at schools, the same patterns of team formation and group competition, the same lack of emphasis on individual winners. The eating patterns symbolizing camaraderie learned at school extend throughout the lives of Japanese. The cooperative cleaning activities children learn in school are found in work groups and religious or spiritual training groups. In this instance schools borrowed a traditional behavior and now reinforce its cultural significance.

Most adult Japanese spend their working lives in the context of large and small groups. The small groups operate in many ways like ban groups at school, and it is noteworthy that this word was borrowed from the vocabulary of adult work in the first place. In Japanese adult contexts, work is most commonly done by groups of people, with different formal titles and abilities, who are jointly responsible for accomplishing a goal or job of work and who act as though they are all involved in all aspects of the task. Factory workers who expect and are expected to cover for each other’s absences, the foreman who takes a place on the line when needed (Kamata 1982; Roberts 1994; Kondo 1990), the bank branch employees who all stay until the last bookkeeping error is found, even those who are not book-
keepers (Rohlen 1974), the worker who feels free to make suggestions about improvements, and the foreman and manager who feel free to consider them (Dore 1987), are all acting in ways consistent with school behavior.

Japanese children learn in school that they can profitably and pleasantly pursue both learning and fun in groups that include people with a wide range of personalities, talents, and disabilities. The ability to do this is as valuable in life after school as it is in the school context. They learn that competition between individuals is not the only road to high achievement. They learn that authority figures need not be automatically resisted or regarded as arbitrary or exploitative.

The expectation that there will be more than one way to solve a problem, that many options should be considered and integrated, is an attitude that outsiders have noticed in many adult contexts: in adaptations of basic research to commercial applications, in strategies for foreign policy and national defense, and in efforts to improve energy conservation. The quest for continual incremental self-improvement also seems to be learned at least in part in school, where self-evaluation and improvement measured against both outside standards and one’s own past performance are cultivated.

Schools are psychologically supportive for Japanese children because schools have very self-consciously taken as their role the education of all children. Japanese educators do not feel that they can be effective only with certain kinds of children or with children from only certain kinds of home backgrounds. All children can learn, all should learn the same basic lessons, and the same sets of teaching techniques can be effective with all children. Schools in Japan are given the responsibility and opportunity of controlling a large part of children’s lives; they not only have the children for a long school year and a long school day, but they also exercise substantial influence over the out-of-school life of children. Given this opportunity, it is thought that schools or educators should not dodge their duty to teach all children by blaming conditions in families and in society for their failures.
Of course, the conditions outside school are better for nearly all Japanese students than they are for many American students. Family stability and economic security for all families makes a big difference. So too does the basic trust in the values taught by schools that pervades Japanese society, so that many families do not resist the efforts of the schools to teach either subject matter or values. But even in the many parts of America where there is little serious dissension from official school values, American students learn less academically, and many of them find school a psychologically destructive environment because they are cast as failures from an early age and because they learn both in school and outside that the behaviors required in school are not the same as those required after school for success in life.

Japanese children can look forward to a decent life, no matter what their social class. The very low level of unemployment in Japan (around 2 percent) and an income distribution that ensures that even those at the bottom of the economic ladder have access to the means for decent housing, food, medical care, and other necessities give credence to the position that all children are being prepared in school for an acceptable life. Because there are very few families in Japan who have experienced seemingly inescapable, grinding, dehumanizing poverty for several generations, the cultural factors that perpetuate maladaptive educational behavior are not a very strong influence. A number of public policies in Japan, including trade barriers and almost absolute barriers to immigration, have helped Japan achieve this enviable position. But education has played its role, too, through its commitment to providing a good general background in compulsory education and good vocational training in specialized education. Japanese citizens are thus equipped for employment in a modern, increasingly technological world. There is a sort of "truth in education" factor here. Schools and society claim that success in education will qualify all children for a reasonable life, and this pledge is fulfilled in adulthood.
The first of the institutional supports that lead to these results is the uniform national curriculum for elementary schools and the uniform level of resources for schools to implement the curriculum. Japan’s Ministry of Education sets a curriculum for all levels of schooling in Japan, and it is not a minimal competency requirement. It is challenging for all students, even those at the top. Teachers are among the loudest critics of it, saying that it is too hard. In the strictest legal sense it is not a required curriculum. Very few schools reject it altogether, however, and most adhere quite closely to its prescriptions. It is only “fair” to children to prepare them to compete with others who follow this curriculum. It may be difficult, but there is general agreement among teachers that it is a good curriculum.

The academic and social effects of this demanding curriculum are not what might be expected. Socially, students are never excluded from their classes because of academic failings: they are always promoted to the next grade, and they are not tracked into special classes or groups or excluded from regular classroom activities or social activities. Academically, the elementary school curriculum is the one most students can master, and failure is in any case a relative term. Mastering 60 percent of a demanding curriculum may lead to higher levels of learning than mastering 100 percent of an easy one. All international comparisons show that Japanese students do attain absolutely high levels of learning, with no more range of variation than in the United States (Lynn 1988:4–17; Stevenson, Azuma, and Hakuta 1986:201–38).

At the elementary level at least, the combination of academic challenge and social inclusiveness seems to be a major element in Japan’s strategy for spurring the top academic children to high achievement, pushing all children to do the best they can, and maintaining self-esteem by not making academic achievement a requirement of social acceptability. It is not necessarily the case, then, that a uniform, demanding curriculum must be united with an elite-oriented school system that psychologically punishes and excludes large numbers of students.
In Japan the national uniform curriculum is combined with an evaluation system that removes individual teachers from imposing consequences for academic achievement or lack of it on students. Because the only consequential evaluations are those of the high school entrance examinations, the college entrance examinations, and the employment entrance examinations, teachers' only role with regard to their students is to teach, to prepare them all as well as possible for the examinations, which are not prepared or given by classroom teachers.

If teachers and students measure their performance against demanding but possible standards set from outside, and grades are not used for punitive purposes or to separate children into different tracks of education or activities, then the relationship between teachers and students is inevitably less adversarial and potentially more cooperative. Both teachers and students benefit from this environment. Students need not feel that they are in direct competition with their classmates for a limited supply of good grades, and grades cease to be a bargaining arena for the student-teacher relationship.

The structural constraints of the curriculum, the uniform provision of resources, and the examination system do not operate in a vacuum, but in the context of a motivational structure that teachers attribute to children.

Reward children for good behavior? I think it's demeaning. In fact, I wouldn't even want to train animals that way. Even for a dog, it's humiliating to do tricks in the hopes of getting something for it.

People learn more in their first five years of life than at any later time. They do this, the world around, in the absence of an educational system, without formal schools, without grades or other special systems of rewards and punishments, without much rebellion, and without much thought on the part of either children or adults. The joy children take in their expanding mastery of physical skills, language,
social skills, and knowledge of the world is evident to any observer, including adults who delight in their learning and assume that life before school will not involve failure for most children. The question of learning in school might better be phrased, why don’t children want to learn at school, when they so manifestly want to do so outside of school?

The incentives for learning that surround Japanese children are different at different ages, I think, but in some ways there is a continuity between the incentives that are effective in early childhood learning and those that are institutionalized in elementary schools. Before they enter school, children are carried along by the utter conviction of adults that they should, can, and will learn to speak their native languages, to control their bodies in socially acceptable ways, and to interact in culturally approved ways with other people. Children find acting in accordance with these expectations satisfying. School learning in elementary schools in Japan is approached by students, teachers, and parents in much the same way.

For adults, the knowledge that what is learned in school is needed and useful in later life, generally enjoyable, and no more problematic than learning to take one’s shoes off or exchange greetings or defecate in the proper places makes them powerful persuaders of children to take the same view.

Seeking economic success in adult life is probably not a very compelling motivation for Japanese children, however, any more than they learn to speak Japanese because it will be advantageous to them as adults or learn to ride bicycles because it provides good training for large muscle development. They learn these things because at the time of learning it feels good, both within themselves and in their social relationships with family and others, to gain these skills. Japanese schools seem to be good at transferring this motivation into the school setting. Even if the motivation of the adults is to provide children with future benefits, they seem to instill a motivational structure for children that is not based on future extrinsic rewards.
There is compelling evidence from psychological studies that giving children extrinsic rewards like candy or tokens or grades for doing what they were doing by free choice extinguishes their desire to pursue those activities without rewards, and that learning prompted by the search for extrinsic rewards is less effective than learning prompted by intrinsic rewards (Deci and Ryan 1985:245-72). Japanese elementary schools seem designed to embed academic learning in the same framework—intrinsically satisfying, without extrinsic rewards—that characterizes nonschool learning. When I asked adults, "Why do children run so hard in the races, when there are no winners and no prizes?" their answer, "Why not?" was really saying, "It feels good to do as well as possible; no other incentive is needed."

If these structural features and understandings of motivation are the basis for academically and socially successful Japanese schools, are they aspects of education that could be adopted in Western schools? My answer to this question is mixed, but not totally negative. Schools are not the driving force of economic conditions, and schools can do little directly to affect employment levels and income distribution patterns, societal features that I feel do matter in the Japanese context and in other contexts. However, there are structural features of schools as institutions and a way of thinking about the social context of school learning that could incorporate some Japanese practices, with the expectation that they would make schools more effective. Some of the most striking differences in school structure and teaching styles between the United States and Japan seem to come from divergent, deep-seated cultural differences in understandings about the nature of children and their motivations for learning. Such differences, so deeply ingrained in our worldview that we cannot recognize them as cultural because they are so real to us, often pose insurmountable barriers to transferring behavior patterns from one culture to another. It seems to me highly unlikely that Westerners can adopt a view of children as innately good, having no unworthy motives, needing only to learn to understand the rewards and constraints of social human life, and act
toward them consistently in terms of that view. I don’t think we’re ever going to be able to see a boy weighing a rock in his hand and not suspect he’s contemplating damage to someone or something. Some of the behavioral consequences of the Japanese view of the nature of children and social learning, however, are also consequences of more Western ways of looking at children and adults.

Two sociolinguists, Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson (1987), working from a long-standing Western philosophical background and a social science tradition, have proposed a framework for looking at social interaction that may provide the basis for non-Japanese to consider and adopt some Japanese practices. The framework they offer is one they claim is applicable in all human cultures; they have been criticized for being too bound by the self-interested, individualistic view of human nature that is part of the Western philosophical tradition. If their framework provides a way for us to understand in our terms what practices Japanese schools incorporate, then it may be easier for us to adopt some of Japan’s effective actions and social structures.

Brown and Levinson see social interaction and the verbal expression that takes place in interaction as the outcome of two contradictory basic needs of every individual. In their view, all individuals want freedom to pursue their own ends unimpeded by interference from others. At the same time, they equally want to be liked, admired, and found worthy by others. Individuals are dependent on each other for this affirmation, and moreover, the affirmation of one’s own self from others is of no value if the others are not valued in turn. Groucho Marx supposedly said that he wouldn’t want to be a member of any club that would let him in, but in life we have to be members of groups that will let us in, and we have to value those people in order to get admiration, friendship, acceptance, or respect for ourselves. Japanese teachers exploit the tension between these two desires of children to create an environment conducive to learning.

Acquiring competence is one way to enhance individual independence, to become powerful and able to do what one wants. Japanese
teachers are attuned to this aspect of learning and use it to motivate children. They do not expect children to learn because they are given extrinsic rewards for the learning, but because it makes them more powerful. In this context physical education, art, and music are as interesting as reading, math, and science.

Japanese classroom organizations and interactions assume that what really motivates children besides the power of competence is acceptance and esteem from other children. In some contexts of school, the athletically able students acquire esteem for their groups; in other contexts the musically or mathematically able students use their competence to gather esteem within the small group and within the larger group. Because the groups are multipurpose and stable for relatively long periods of time, all the members are able to contribute and receive contributions; the result is mutual esteem that operates in both academic and nonacademic activities. In all these contexts social skills that encourage groups to elicit and make the best use of the aptitudes and preferences of all the group members bring about more positive social rewards for all the group members.

The academic competence children gain is frequently exercised in social interactions in Japanese classrooms. A composition is written and read to classmates. An idea for solving a math problem is shared with the han, and with any luck the group will be applauded for coming up with it. Both giving and taking from peers bring rewards. The affirmation of worth socially that comes from the display of academic learning is what makes school learning more compelling for Japanese children than for American ones. It is not that Japanese children find learning the multiplication tables or the capitals of the prefectures less "boring" than Americans find them, but that Japanese schools make these the focus of social interactions that are intrinsically rewarding for children.

Many times American adults marvel at the intense interest in learning "boring" subject matter that children display about nonacademic matters. The capacity of children to learn sports statistics, the
complicated interactions of many computer games, the trivia of information about television stars, and the characters of television series that children seem to acquire effortlessly, all attest to the contextual, social definition of what's "boring." Japanese schools make academic learning one of the activities of the same groups that focus on social activities. Learning seems to be easier and less "boring" because it takes place in "interesting" groups.

These social interactions in Japan are primarily with peers, not with teachers, whose policy is to be self-effacing. They are relations within a peer group that is stable enough over a long enough time period that one can and wants to seek self-worth and validation from the group members, and they are varied enough so that most members can make valuable contributions at least some of the time. Over time, in Japanese preschools and elementary schools, teachers entice children into academic activities by exploiting the nonacademic search for mastery and independence on the one hand and the hunger for social self-validation on the other.

There is nothing in Western or American culture that precludes exploiting the same basic needs and desires of children in our schools. We could have larger, more stable classes, less focus on student-teacher interaction, more heterogeneous class groups, more "fun" and more noncompetitive academic learning activities, more time spent at school, more genuine learning in the arts and physical education.

The first structural change that would have to be made in American schools to put this motivational structure into practice would be to move to larger, more heterogeneous classes. Japanese elementary schools operate with large classes. Educators claim this is done not to save money, but because the social atmosphere for learning that is centered in the peer group, not in individual student-teacher relationships, requires a certain critical mass to work. Thirty-five students in grades one through three, forty-five in grades four through six, are currently considered the goals in Japan. Some schools have smaller classes because of lower population densities; they are considered
disadvantaged. There is a large body of research on learning levels and class sizes in the United States, but no clear conclusion can be drawn about effective class size. The rationales for small classes in the United States are that teachers cannot be expected to control larger groups and that individual attention to each child is possible only in small classes. The assumption that school learning is based on the student-teacher dyad is very clear here, along with the idea that different children need to be taught differently, and possibly different things.

My observations in Japan, the observations of other Western students of Japanese education, and the record of international comparisons of achievement have led me to believe that the Japanese approach is probably more effective. Making learning primarily a matter of interaction between teacher and student, including the grading aspects of that relationship, seems to be less effective than the Japanese group effort to conquer a syllabus. I and others have seen teachers utilizing a number of teaching strategies in their classrooms, including many recommended for students who have trouble with passive verbal presentations of material. I think classes in the United States should be larger but constant, as suggested above: no special groupings for different subjects, no traveling to different classrooms, no tracking within classes, and both social and academic activities emphasized as endeavors that include everyone.

What are the operational advantages of larger classes? First, they can contain a larger variety of children, so that there are likely to be fewer children who stand out because of some unique characteristic. With a larger number of children, the interests and abilities of any single child are more likely to find at least a partial match in some other child. As the Japanese say, larger classes include "more friends."

Some games and activities require a certain number of participants in order to be carried out or to be effective. Here the constant Japanese use of ban groups is especially noticeable. If the class contains only enough children for two or three groups, those groups are likely to be very different from each other overall, and they are likely to fall
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into the disadvantages of unequal competition rather than providing the forum for cooperative-competitive stimulation that is the ideal for the han system. Again, with more children of more individual characteristics available, teachers can use a greater variety of grouping criteria to provide more experience in group interaction and different learning environments over the course of a year or two. In larger classes with more groupings possible, teachers have more scope to avoid creating class scapegoats, clowns, and stars. Teachers can defuse antagonisms and possible problems through grouping practices when those groupings are not tracking by academic ability. You need lots of students to have effective groups; you need effective groups for socially motivated academic learning.

Observers agree that Japanese teachers have a strong incentive to teach good behavior patterns to their students because they are going to spend a lot of time with those students, in most cases two full school years, 480 days. From a child’s point of view, I think it’s easier to learn to get along with one teacher and one set of classmates than with many different ones. I suggest that classrooms should be more nearly self-contained units than is common practice in many schools now. One teacher who teaches all subjects, one group of pupils who do not travel from place to place, teacher to teacher, all day long, all in one room that belongs to them and is their real home. The integration of social and academic activities crucial to this view of education happens most easily in the multipurpose homeroom.

The change of mind I was perhaps most reluctant to have forced on me in this study of Japanese schools was with regard to tracking in schools. But I now feel that academic tracking does not provide the best environment for academic learning for bright, average, or slow students and that it would be better to have a hard curriculum and academically integrated classes with the inclusive social practices used in Japanese classrooms. Academic challenges for able students can still be included, as the Japanese experience shows, and with the right social practices the poorer students need not suffer the loss of face and
self-esteem they demonstrably do suffer in American schools when they are separated out and put in the slowest reading group or the "dumb class." Overall, the academic level of the poorest students in Japanese classrooms is higher than the performance of the poorest students in American schools, even when the American students have been given special help. So are the achievement levels of the average students and the best students.

Much tracking in American schools, particularly that which separates children into private, religious, and magnet schools is class, race, and ethnic tracking. Perhaps effective teaching and learning in the schools attended by most students could help alleviate the need parents feel for this kind of segregation.

If schools are going to utilize social learning, social ties, and social motivations for academic (and social) learning, then they probably need to have the children in school for longer school days, encompassing more social activities, and for more days each year. If American children were to spend the forty hours a week in school that Japanese children do, then it is crucial that the extra time not be filled with academic classes. I would suggest that the eight hours a day should be apportioned as follows: 5 to 5 1/2 hours of academic instruction, including homework, art, music, and physical education, the rest of the time (2 1/2 to 3 hours) for recess, lunch, cleaning or other public service, snack, class meetings, and club meetings. Children would still have the evenings and weekends free.

Japanese schools and teachers seem not to feel guilty about capitalizing on children's desire to have fun in the effort to reconcile them to discipline and learning. Many activities, from generous recess periods to school trips, are undertaken simply for the purpose of having fun, with the conviction that this makes for an atmosphere conducive for learning. Students are not deprived of these activities as punishment. I think school should be more fun in America. Most of these fun activities turn out to involve a lot of physical activity, an advantage in itself.
Most children do not take easily to long periods of sitting still, and large doses of activity seem to make class time more productive.

Many people feel that teachers are the most important variable in schools and classrooms. Japanese teachers are generally good, and there are a number of reasons for this. One is that they have gone through Japanese schools themselves and have received a good education through university level. Next, teaching is regarded as a good job in terms of status and salary in Japan, and it is still one of the few professions in which women can really make a career, though at elementary school level they are only about 50 percent of the teaching staff. Teaching thus attracts a large and good pool of applicants, and there is stiff competition for teaching jobs. Successful applicants must have completed a university teacher training course and a major in a substantive field. They are then chosen on the basis of an entrance examination.

Schools offer strong support for individual teachers. They are not isolated from fellow teachers, as is often the case in other systems. Their workday at school is structured so that they spend time with others in the teachers' room, and both formally and informally they are encouraged to share experiences and information about students, teaching tactics, problems, and effective techniques. They help each other develop supplementary teaching materials and design together ways to approach the requirements of the curriculum. The most effective, experienced teachers are given the most difficult classes and the most difficult students. Their tales about dealing with them are a continuing topic of informal conversation in the teachers' room.

Going to school is a real job for students, and even more, teaching is a real job for teachers. Teachers are expected to be at school from 8:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M., five and a half days a week (most Japanese work a full or half day on Saturdays). The long summer vacation for students is not a vacation for teachers, who are required to use the time for study, be present at school on specified days, give swimming lessons, and
accompany classes that go on summer field trips. There is thus no sense that teaching is just something women fit in around child rearing, a (false) perception I think persists in the United States. Teachers' earnings are at about the median level for workers with their education levels and age; like other salaries they rise relatively steeply with age throughout a teaching career. It is not necessary to become an administrator to reach high salary levels.

Like American teachers, Japanese teachers say they choose the work because they like children and they like teaching. I think they work in situations that increase these professional satisfactions. Their circumstances enhance their ability to be effective teachers, and their involvement with one class of children in a comprehensive social and academic environment over a two-year period of time maximizes their satisfaction with the impact they can have on children.

Accompanying the structural changes to larger, more heterogeneous, multipurpose classes, longer school hours, and supportive teaching conditions should come a move toward an effective national curriculum, accompanied by an evaluation system that is not dependent on grades given by teachers. The changes in motivational structure for both teachers and students that this entails would change the nature of classroom interactions in the ways detailed throughout this book. Emphasis on teaching, with evaluation assigned to the big, bad, external Examination System, means that teachers and students are engaged in the same cooperative enterprise, not opponents or caught in the web of competition, exploitation, and resistance that relations between the powerful and the powerless always entail.

The last major advantage in structural terms that I think Japanese schools have over American ones is that in Japanese social and cultural terms, schools legitimately have academic, social, civic, and moral teaching responsibilities. In the United States schools also do academic, social, civic, and moral teaching, but not all of these are accepted as part of the function of schools. Every social scientist and educator will agree that schools do teach moral lessons, whether the teachers
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or the system intend that they do so or not. Some of the most eloquent writing in critical education studies of the last twenty years has documented just how schools teach the lessons of the “hidden curriculum” that reproduce the race, gender, and class inequalities of modern societies, their moral justifications, and the behavior patterns that perpetuate them (Ogbu 1974; Bowles and Gintis 1976; Willis 1981; Cookson and Persell 1985; Sadker and Sadker 1994). The public curriculum of American schools certainly does not articulate these goals, but these are lessons learned and taught, though perhaps not intentionally.

Every mention of morals or ethics or values in the schools in the United States, however, runs immediately into the rock of religion. Commonalities of ethical judgment found among different religions and philosophical outlooks become obscured because of the difference in justification for those judgments that different groups offer. Focus in the United States has historically been on the differences in justifications, not on the commonalities of behavior prescribed. These are emotionally laden issues in the United States, so that people who advocate sexual abstinence for teenagers based on divine commandments feel nothing in common with people who advocate the same sexual abstinence based on the immaturity of teenagers and the importance of social and individual responsibility. Religion, morality, and sex are intimately linked in the United States, though they are not in Japan and in some other cultures.

Because schools are inevitably institutions that impart morals, and because morals are “religious” in the United States, it may be necessary to augment the current version of public schools here with ones based on communities that share a moral universe of discourse. I am suggesting that a set of schools of several varieties of religious-philosophical persuasions, chosen by families, be deliberately and overtly given the responsibility of imparting moral values to students, rather than having values be part of a hidden, covert, illegitimate curriculum. Let schools design their activities to teach values openly.
Finally, in connection with the civic and moral teaching roles of schools, let me offer a few arguments in favor of ritual and continuity and against constant innovation in educational practices. Americans seem to have a fear of ritual and patterned behaviors in many contexts, including schools. In Japanese schools rituals and routines seem to punctuate schooltime; they facilitate transitions between activities and are comforting in their constancy. One of the most striking examples is the procedure for beginning each class, with students calling others to attention and leading them in assuming the proper postures and in turning their attention to the teacher and the class material. The alternation between apparently wild recesses or class breaks and the focused attention of class time is greater than in many U.S. schools, and the short ritual effectively makes the transition. Larger rituals such as Sports Day, ceremonies at the beginning of each term and the end of the year, the weekly assembly, and the weekly class meeting also give children a sense of passing time and changing roles and of stability and constancy.

We have a preoccupation with newness in school activities: new textbooks, new approaches, new projects, new learning activities. Many good ideas and practices get lost in the search for new things, and the ritualized passage of children through socially recognized landmarks of schooling is lost. The learning experience of each child will remain unique and individual, even if others have used and will use the same vehicles for learning, the first-grade morning glory and Culture Day chicken, for example. In Japanese schools teachers help each other a great deal to develop techniques for teaching, sharing ideas and stories about what works and what doesn’t work to teach a particular point, about the second and third tactics to try in a class, about approaches to use with difficult students. If each teacher feels that her teaching must reflect only her own individual bent, experience, and talent and that it must be different each year, useful experience is lost, not shared and not made tradition.
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Shared experience, across grades, across schools, across generations, was chosen in Japan to impart a sense of national identity during Japan’s nation-building days. I think it is foolish of us to deny unifying experiences to our children, when we live in a time of such discord and loss of confidence in our unity as a country. A national curriculum and other experiences that children in the nation, the state, the city, and the school have in common might foster a sense of community that education does not seem to be very effective in conveying these days.