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Learning together in a group

Children's learning culture in Japanese preschools

The author describes the goals of preschool education in Japan and the cultural concepts influencing these.

Education is supposed to enable children to become fully-fledged members of their society. Ideas about what a person needs in order to live autonomously vary widely from one cultural setting to the next. This article presents the path Japan has chosen for the education of its 3- to 5-year-olds in preschools.

The study

In order to be able to understand what makes Japanese preschools special, 5 kindergartens (Youchien) and 1 day care centre (Hoikuen) were visited in February and March 2011.¹ The facilities were heterogeneous, with Buddhist, Shintoist and Christian orientations. While all the kindergartens were private², their "elite factor" varied: the parents pay between 330 and 1,300 USD per month for their child. The financial basis affects the size of the facility and the materials available, and has less effect on the education principles. This matches the view of many preschool managers that the most important element in the education process is the teacher. One class of 4- to 5-year-olds in each preschool was selected for full-day participatory observation, followed by a guided interview in Japanese with the manager of each preschool. In particular, Volker Schubert's work

on Japanese education (Schubert, 1992) provided the basis for preparing the interview questions.

Selected results

The observations of the children's everyday life and the analysis of these observations in the interviews with the managers show a high level of agreement across all the preschools visited. To understand this, it is important to know that preserving the harmony of the community is central to Japanese culture. Ultimately, all else must be subordinated to this harmony – including children's individuality.

Aims of preschool education

The primary goal of education in Japanese preschools is to learn how to live in a group. This includes learning the rules and etiquette of the group while playing with others, being able to cooperate and communicate according to Japanese conventions (this mainly means learning restraint), negotiating needs, developing trust, being able to imagine how others feel, acknowledging others, and ultimately, being able to act independently in a group. Children are also expected to learn that certain tasks can only be managed in a group, and that certain tasks and duties must be carried out for the community. Thus, duties and jobs are assigned on a daily basis. Children are supposed to learn about the world through direct contact, by trying things out, doing their own activities etc. The preschoolers are

encouraged to have their own experiences and to do things themselves. They may explore all the possibilities offered by human existence. The idea is to reinforce their feeling that they can cope even with difficult tasks on their own. The desired outcome is a pure, well-trained mind and a healthy body. Every child is assumed to be, by nature, able to reach this goal.

How teachers perceive their role

In Japanese preschools there are no reprimands or behavioural controls, nor is help given unless it is explicitly desired. Through their experiences in the group, the children become familiar with their own limits and possibilities. As they play with others, they have to negotiate rules; understanding and restraint are important. The sense of belonging is the driving force which makes children do the right thing. As a rule, children only experience sanctions from their own group. The teacher's influence is limited to supporting the children by responding to their interests, motivations and feelings, and providing them with a stimulating environment. His or her most important tool is praise for their achievements. Praise is intended to motivate children to attempt new tasks, and to ensure that life in the preschool is enjoyable. Explicit praise also helps to build trust between child and teacher which is fundamental to the education process.

Everyday preschool life

A core element of children's everyday life in preschools is ritualised, fre-

quently repeated routines. Teachers play or sing songs that on the one hand serve to convey and consolidate learning content. All the relevant Japanese phrases are part of the songs for the morning greeting, for giving thanks after a meal, for saying goodbye and so on. On the other hand, songs are used to retain the attention of up to 30 children and to get them into the right mood for a new task. Activities thus have a clear beginning and a clear ending. A song can also take the place of a verbal exhortation from the teacher. A typical situation:

The children have finished their craft activity and move on to free play. The large group splits up into many small ones; each group is doing something different: playing with food made of paper, building something with building blocks, others fetch picture books or start a new craft activity. The noise

level rises and it becomes hard to keep track of what is happening. The teachers stay on the sidelines; this is about the children, the group itself. When it is time to work together again, a teacher sits down at the piano and starts to play a tune. Toys disappear tidily into labelled boxes, books and building blocks are put back, art and craft materials packed away. Shortly afterwards, all the children are sitting neatly on the floor in front of the teacher, singing along. The children's attention is captured, without any exhortation or raised voices. Everyone knows that something new is about to start, and is looking forward to it.

Behaviours are taught through example, explicit mention, daily communal repetition, songs etc. Important sentences (e.g. get-well wishes to an absent child) are recited together in chorus. All the sequences of action needed in everyday life are practised with the children until these can be carried out smoothly, like bowing in

a ceremony, or using chopsticks properly. Repeated practising of behaviours and rules "in advance" means that children have a high degree of security and seldom have to face unforeseen situations.

Hygiene and safety are also considered to be important: Children learn to put on and take off their shoes properly, change their clothes, brush their teeth after lunch, or wash their



No verbal exhortation is necessary in a Japanese preschool: the teacher begins to play a song, all the children hurry to get seated and join in the singing

hands regularly. In preparation for primary school, children practise to concentrate on their work, to pay attention, and to be patient. Active involvement in Japanese culture is also central; this includes Japanese festivals such as the beginning of spring or the Doll Festival. Children make things, discuss how to behave at the event, and practise this behaviour with many repetitions. Holidays thus become cultural events which preschoolers are fully aware of and well-prepared for.

To sum up these observations: everyday life in Japanese preschools works impressively well. The enjoyment and discipline with which children learn while playing in groups, the professionalism of the teachers, and the personal commitment shown in the preparation and delivery of their teaching were a special experience. The advantage of the methods used

in Japanese preschools is that they make life there quiet and harmonious. One might question what price is paid for this. Professor Hiroyasu Ogasawara, who teaches education at Nihon University in Tokyo, believes that the disadvantage of Japanese education is that it aims at homogenisation. He argues that people are brought up to function without thinking, like robots – an image familiar from Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*.

In his view, it would be ideal if children were able to pursue their own activities individually, and independently of one another. This, too, he suggests, could create community and mutual support. He admits, however, that this kind of education lies in the distant future, since it requires more time and effort than the education offered at present.³

NOTES

¹ *Kindergartens and day-care centres have different historical roots in Japan; today, however, they perform the same functions with regard to 3- to 5-year-olds, and have similar goals. The visit to 2 further facilities had to be cancelled due to the earthquake on 11 March 2011.*

² *In Japan, the majority of preschools are privately owned.*

³ *Interview with Professor Hiroyasu Ogasawara at Nihon University in Tokyo in March 2011.*

REFERENCE

Schubert, Volker (1992): *Die Inszenierung der Harmonie. Erziehung und Gesellschaft in Japan*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.

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