# The Basics in Japan: The Three C's

## In Japanese elementary schools, the three Rs are underlined by the three C's: connection, character, and content.

when he left, we shared a chuckle over his exaggerated view of American society—until we considered how comparably distorted is the average American's view of Japan, at least with regard to elementary education. Those of us who have for many years studied what actually goes on in Japanese elementary schools find *not* the academic pressure cookers of media lore, but lively, friendly places devoted to the three Cs: connection, character, and content.

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### **Establishing Connection**

Japanese elementary teachers tell us their first job is to help children develop a strong, positive emotional connection to school:

Children don't come to school because they want to learn. Children come to school because they want to see their friends. So I put the most effort into getting friends for each child. Particularly when a child is slow, I try to get that child to enjoy friendships.

This teacher's emphasis on friendship is not just happenstance; Japan's national *Course of Study for Elementary Schools* includes many goals related to children's friendships, belonging, and social development (Monbushou 1989). One national goal is for students to develop "a feeling of intimacy with the people at school, and enjoyment of classroom life." Survey research suggests that Japanese elementary teachers take social development seriously. When asked to rank the importance of eight goals of education, Japanese elementary teachers gave first and second priority to students' "personal growth, fulfillment, and self-understanding" and "human relations skills," respectively. "Academic excellence" and "specific occupational skills" ranked seventh and eighth (Ito 1994). Japanese elementary schools are organized to promote friendships and belonging: There is no ability-grouping or tracking; students stay together for two years (usually with the same teacher); and about 30 days of the school year are devoted to activities designed to build human connections within the school community—sports day, arts day, school trips, hiking, and student-run festivals.

Japanese teachers build students' connection to school not just by supporting friendships and schoolwide events, but also by giving students a say in running the classroom and school. Through twice-daily class meetings, class committees, and a rotating system of leadership, even 1st graders take responsibility for shaping class goals and leading class discussions (Lewis 1995).

By meeting children's needs in this way, Japanese elementary educators foster children's attachment to school and their willingness to live by the school's values. In the United States, too, research shows that elementary schools that become more caring, responsive places better foster children's ethical and social development (Schaps et al. 1996).

### **Developing Character**

What are those values? Friendship, cooperation, responsibility, doing one's best, and maintaining safety and health were prominent 1st grade goals in 19 classrooms we studied (Lewis 1995). Japan's national *Course of Study for Elementary Schools*, a slim volume that specifies the goals and content of elementary education, divides the content of moral education into four categories, as follows (we've included only a few examples from each category):

- 1. Things related primarily to oneself:
- "reflecting on one's life"
- "having the courage to do what one believes is right"
- "fully completing the activities and study that are one's responsibility"
  - 2. Things related primarily to others:
  - "trusting others"



• "being considerate and kind to others"

"deepening friendships while learning"

3. Things related primarily to nature and the sublime:

• "feeling intimacy with the nature that's near oneself and being kindhearted in the treatment of plants and animals"

• "having a heart that is moved by things beautiful and noble"

4. Things primarily related to group life and society:

■ "to uphold one's promises and society's rules, and to have a heart that values the public good"

■ "to actively participate in the groups in one's daily life... cooperating and taking initiative to be responsible" (Monbushou 1989, pp. 105-107).

These values, the *Course of Study* specifies, should not just be taught in the 35 periods designated yearly for moral education, but should be embodied in every activity of the school day.

To foster supportive relationships among students and between students and teachers, Japanese teachers generally avoid using rewards or punishments, which, as one said, "erect walls of prejudice against students who are slower academically, or less able to sit still." Instead, students discuss "what kind of class we want to be," and selfevaluate progress (Lewis 1995). Class goals—such as "Let's become friends"; "Let's be a class that works well together"; and "Let's persist until the end"-are clearly inspired by the Course of Study, but students discuss and help shape these goals, and thus are likely to feel a sense of ownership. Typically, the family-like groups within the class also choose goals.

In the wiggly weeks following

summer vacation, many groups in the classrooms we studied chose goals like "Let's keep to our time schedule" and "Let's be ready to begin each lesson"—goals that clearly relate to the *Course of Study's* goal to "lead a regular daily life," but were chosen by students after reflecting on their own behavior.

Displays of children's personal goals, in their own handwriting, are a ubiquitous feature of Japanese elementary classrooms. Often, goals are accompanied by lively illustrations such as a 1st grader popping out of bed when his mother calls him, or put together in a mural that symbolizes growth, for example, a tree with leaves representing each child's goals. Many classrooms are decorated by children's portraits with their personal goals written on comics-style balloons coming from their mouths, such as: "I want to do all my homework"; "I will try to raise my hand every day"; and



"I will try to clean the classroom without goofing off."

In most classrooms, students reflect on their goals—for the school, class, small group, and self—during regular times set aside for *hansei* (reflection) that may occur daily, weekly, or less often (Lewis 1995). When they feel they have achieved a goal, they choose a new one.

It may take months or years before children become responsible, wellbehaved students. So Japanese elementary schools strike many Westerners as remarkably noisy, chaotic places. But because children have helped shape goals and judge their own progress, they become very invested in responsible behavior. A Japanese teacher who waited nearly 20 minutes while the student monitors struggled to quiet the class told us: "I could have quieted the students with one word, but I don't want to create children who obey just because I am here."

### **Presenting Content**

Building students' character and connection to school are basics in Japan, and so is the third "C," content. But the content of the Japanese curriculum offers two surprises.

The first surprise is that *less is more.* By U.S. and world standards, the Japanese curriculum is very frugal. According to the Third International



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> Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), Japanese 8th grade science textbooks cover just eight topics, compared to an average of more than 65 for American 8th grade textbooks (Schmidt et al. 1997). Japanese textbooks are brief; 6th grade science textbooks, for example,

are 60 pages per semester, in a 7-by-10-inch format. The entire 5th grade science unit on levers. which normally takes 12 class periods, covers just 10 pages of a small textbook, with much of the space devoted to lively photographs and cartoons of students conducting experiments with levers, and pictures of daily-life items, such as bottleopeners and pliers. The text includes many questions ("How is it easiest to cut cardboard with scissors—with the tip or base of the blades?") and "Let's do" statements ("Let's try to lift something using a pole that is too heavy to lift with our hands" and "Let's try changing the position of the weight and of our hands"). They present a relatively small amount of information, focused on just a few key issues.

Japanese textbooks are not approved if judged to provide content *in excess* of that required by the national *Course of Study*. An elementary science textbook was rejected because an electricity experiment used three batteries instead of two and was therefore deemed unnecessarily complicated for elemen-

tary students. Conversely, how often does talk about a national curriculum or standards in the United States focus on *limiting* coverage?

Americans are often surprised to hear how frugal the Japanese curriculum is. A researcher citing the TIMSS results recently challenged us: "If the Japanese curriculum covers less content, how come Japanese students know more?"

We think there are two explanations for this apparent paradox. First, Japanese students study topics in depth. Although they spend no more time overall than their American peers studying science (IEA 1996), Japanese students spend more time on each of the small number of topics they study. For example, Japanese 5th graders are expected to spend 10 science periods periods of hands-on work and discussion, many of the students were surprised to find that the amount of weight at the end of a pendulum didn't affect its cycle time. So the teacher provided a full period in which children could again experiment with the pendulums, this time with a focus on studying the findings that "are puzzling or that you have a hard time believing." As the teacher explained, "It's natural for children, as well as adults, to dismiss findings that go against their conceptions.

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studying the function of weight, and there are only two pieces of knowledge that they are expected to take away: The bigger and faster an object is, the more it will move another object it impacts, and the round-trip time of a weight suspended from a string is affected only by the length of the string (not by the amount of weight).

In addition, the unit has several objectives related to children's interest (for example, that they will want to build toys using what they've learned about weight) and to their scientific thinking and observation (for example, that they can graph their experiments and think quantitatively about the variables). In one classroom we studied, students spent a whole period observing realworld pendulums (swingsets), a period generating ideas about the variables that affect a pendulum's cycle time, several periods designing and conducting experiments to test these ideas, and a full period discussing the findings of their experiments. Even after all these

So it's important to build in enough time for students to repeat experiments until they convince themselves." Since they are

given 10 periods to learn two things about weight and movement, it's not surprising that

Japanese students are likely to learn these two things in ways that are unforgettable. Japanese teachers have time to use techniques likely to promote deep understanding—such as having students write, draw, and discuss their predictions; revisit their initial predictions in light of new observations; debate opposing viewpoints; and make predictions to new situations (Hess and Azuma 1991).

Indeed, American researchers report that drawing links between daily life experiences and science greatly promotes students' scientific development (Linn and Songer 1991, Linn and Muilenberg 1996). Such links leverage students' in-class learning time by making it likely they'll reinforce and expand their understanding when they use swings, go bowling, or watch sumo wrestlers (to take three illustrations from Japanese textbooks).

Yet, how many American elementary teachers feel they have time to spend a whole period observing swingsets?

Japanese teachers' professional development, which focuses on shared observation and discussion of actual classroom lessons (Lewis and Tsuchida 1997), enables them to compare approaches for teaching the shared curriculum. We have seen teachers debate the advantages of swingsets versus ropes in demonstrating pendulums, and of stringed instruments versus string telephones in studying the connection between sound and vibration. Given a frugal, shared curriculum, teachers can devote time to honing effective approaches and examples, not wading through massive textbooks to figure out what's really important to teach (Lewis and Tsuchida 1997, Stevenson and Stigler 1992, Stigler and Hiebert 1997).

#### **Emphasis on the Whole**

The second surprise in the Japanese curriculum-and the second explanation for why Japanese students apparently learn more from less content-is an emphasis on development of the whole child. Although we often hear that Japan has a national curriculum, we rarely hear that one-third of the required elementary instructional hours are devoted to nonacademic subjects such as art, music, physical education, homemaking, and special class activities (Lewis 1995). Beyond these instructional hours, much time is devoted to twice-daily class meetings, to frequent whole-school meetings, and to school festivals and trips. As one scholar has written, "Japanese teachers believe in whole-person education. . . . They feel that their most important job is to develop well-rounded whole people, not just intellects" (Cummings 1980, p. 13, italics omitted).

In other words, while art and music are disappearing from many American schools, the Japanese regard those subjects as basic. The arts teach many qualities of character—teamwork, persistence, responsibility, cooperation—that are central emphases of the Japanese elementary curriculum. They may also enhance students' connection to school. When one of our sons attended Japanese elementary school, the student-led singing that began each day, the weekly school assemblies with brass band, and the chance to sculpt, draw self-portraits, and build a marble

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maze were real attractions. A varied curriculum gives many children—not just the linguistically and mathematically able—a chance to excel. One Japanese teacher noted: "In their small groups, children learn that the member who excels at mathematics might need help on the parallel bars."

Finally, what's basic in elementary education depends on what aspects of our culture we wish to pass on. As two California teachers recently said to us rhetorically: "Isn't it important for students to have some songs that they all share?" and "Can we consider ourselves a culture if we don't pass on any art or music to our children?"

### **Final Thoughts**

Our portrait of Japanese elementary schools—the emphasis on close human connections, students' social and ethical development, and a depth of curriculum—differs profoundly from that presented in mainstream American media. Yet our findings are consistent with the work of other researchers who have spent time in Japanese elementary schools (Benjamin 1997, Cummings 1980, Easley and Easley 1983, Conduit and Conduit 1996, Sato 1991).

Why is there a discrepancy between

research and media accounts? One reason may be that American commentators simply assume that Japanese elementary schools are similar to junior and senior high schools, which do tend to emphasize conformity and examfocused study to a much greater degree than do elementary schools (Rohlen 1983, Rohlen and LeTendre 1996). But

> make no mistake about the roots of Japanese achievement: Japan's high performance on international tests emerges during the elementary years, and in samples with few children attending supplemen-

tary schooling (Lewis 1995, Stevenson and Stigler 1992, U.S. Department of Education 1997).

Further, the American media's persistent focus on the emotional costs of Japanese education may reveal our own belief that academic achievement has emotional costs. In schools where learning is a competitive endeavor, this may well be true, because succeeding academically means doing better than one's classmates—hardly a prescription for friendships. But in Japanese elementary schools, learning is cooperative, and success is judged by whether one sets and meets rigorous personal goals and does one's best for the group.

Japan's three Cs—connection, character, content—are interdependent. When school is a place of deep human connections, children are motivated to be the best people they can. When values of friendship, cooperation, and responsibility are taken seriously, school becomes a better place for learning *and* for friendship. When content is pared down so that children have plenty of time to see the meaning and importance in what they learn, students are likely to develop a stronger connection to school. ■

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