

Educating Hearts and Minds

Reflections on Japanese Preschool and Elementary Education

BY CATHERINE LEWIS

NEW YORK: CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1995

In *Educating Hearts and Minds*, Lewis guides us through the diverse world of Japanese preschool and elementary school students. It is a world that Lewis knows well. Her research centers on early childhood education, and she has also sent her own children to Japanese schools. Like Peak's *Learning to Go to School*, *Educating Hearts and Minds* makes a major contribution to the study of early childhood education.

This book is useful in a wide variety of instructional settings: from basic courses on Japanese culture to introductory education classes. I would especially recommend it for use in preservice teacher development courses, as the book not only demolishes many pernicious myths about Japan, but also raises fundamental questions about American assumptions regarding early childhood education. For many students, it will be unsettling to learn of the marked differences in attitudes that characterize U.S. and Japanese teachers.

Lewis's central thesis is that there are seven qualities that are distinctive of early childhood education in Japan. These are (1) a focus on the whole child; (2) an emphasis on positive social relations; (3) efforts by adults to build a community in school; (4) discipline which is oriented toward values; (5) emphasis on children's thinking and problem solving; (6) an emphasis on the emotional (*uetto*) aspect of learning; (7) widespread use of reflection.

These last two aspects are particularly salient for those interested in a more general understanding of Japanese culture. Just as Doi (1973) used a reified formulation of *amae* to convey the importance of dependence in Japanese social relations, Lewis uses *wet* (*uetto*) and *dry* (*dorai*) to convey the relative emphases that Japanese educators put on interpersonal relations (*wet*) versus a rational and logical curriculum (*dry*). Japanese teachers use these terms to distinguish themselves from what they perceive to be an arid Western attitude toward education that places more emphasis on academic proficiency than on the social and emotional development of the child.

Reflection (*hansei*) is another aspect of Japanese education and culture which has received little attention outside of essays on Zen meditation. Reflection is a tool which teachers use both for individual improvement and behavior management, and similar uses can be seen throughout Japanese society. Public reflection on past errors,

accompanied by an emotional promise to reform, is characteristic of the way Japanese adults deal with everything from poor sales performance to political corruption.

Lewis also offers some explanation for why, in the older grades, the gentle and community-oriented nature of Japanese education seems to disappear. The pressure for conformity, at the elementary level, is relatively weak compared to that encountered in Japanese middle schools. Peer control, which is implemented with remarkable ingenuity in the early years, can spin out of balance when children reach the stage when pressures to perform on the entrance exams become intense. As Lewis shows, rates of school refusal and bullying rise dramatically during middle school.

However, she clearly demonstrates that in terms of overall social pathology, Japan compares quite favorably with the U.S. While the nurturing atmosphere of the early years may not continue in the Japanese middle schools and high schools, Japanese adolescents appear to be more well-adjusted, based on national data, than their American counterparts.

Japanese students compare favorably with students in other countries on most social indicators and on international tests. Lewis shows that much of this success is likely to flow from the quality of preschool and elementary education. Although learning takes place in very different ways in Japanese high schools, colleges, banks or factories, the basic insistence on cooperation, self-improvement, and reflection as well as the emphasis on persistence and energy which are developed in elementary school, underpin basic Japanese attitudes toward education. Lewis brings forth these themes and conveys them through the use of indigenous paradigms and metaphors. She offers the average student some simple yet powerful ways to make sense of modern Japanese culture. ■

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