

Graduate School Confidential

Misguided First Impressions of Japanese Preschools

By Gary DeCoker

I started graduate school in 1980 after living in Japan for four years. In my second semester, a nearby college held a colloquium for business and community leaders in Detroit, Michigan, on “What We Can Learn From Japan.” They asked me to talk about Japanese education, specifically high achievement test scores.

There wasn’t much scholarship available on Japanese education then, but after an extensive card catalog search at the University of Michigan library, I discovered some Japanese government reports and other sources indicating that the literacy rate in Japan—even among elementary school children—was high, so I decided to focus on preschools, where I assumed the groundwork was laid.

I’d never been to a Japanese preschool but for two years had observed one from a distance out my office window at the Oomoto Foundation in Kameoka, Japan. Every morning, children in blue jackets, grouped by their colored caps, would assemble in obedient lines to do calisthenics. Music blared from start to finish. Then, the students chanted something, bowed to their teachers, and entered the school.

I compiled a bunch of data from my library search and wrote some of what I found on transparencies in preparation for the big day—my first talk on Japanese education, or anything for that matter. I estimated the audience to be about 300 as I strode to the podium and slapped my first transparency on the overhead projector. I’m not sure exactly what I said that day, but my conclusion was solid. Japanese preschools use a disciplined approach to teach reading and math, which sets the groundwork for high achievement in subsequent years, I confidently pronounced. Nevermind that I was completely misinformed.

A few years later, while in Kyoto working on my dissertation, I read Catherine Lewis’s 1984 article “Cooperation and Control in Japanese Nursery Schools” (*Comparative Education Review* 28, no. 1) and realized how little I knew about preschools in Japan. Needing a break from the solitary nature of my dissertation research—translations of twelfth- to fourteenth-century treatises on the teaching of calligraphy—I decided to find out for myself what was being taught in a Japanese preschool. After spending a couple of days observing and talking with teachers and the principal at one preschool, I decided to visit another, and then another.

When I arrived back in Ann Arbor, Michigan, from Kyoto with my translations in hand, I still had a year’s worth of background research left to complete my dissertation. My adviser knew that my PhD program did not require a master’s degree, but when he learned of my preschool research, he suggested that I turn it into an MA thesis in Japanese studies. “You’ve already completed the coursework.” So, for the next year, I finished my PhD dissertation and wrote my MA thesis, *Japanese Preschool Education: An Inside Look at the Variety of Schools*. My conclusion: There was a continuum of approaches, from academic to nonacademic. Some schools explicitly taught reading and math; others did not; most fell somewhere in between.

When I gave my talk on preschools at the colloquium in Detroit, I didn’t expect an honorarium. Later, I found out that professors, but not graduate students, received US \$200 for their presentations. I wrote the organizers to make the case that students needed the money more than professors. A check arrived in my mailbox a couple of weeks later. I knew I could use the money and thought I definitely deserved it. In retrospect,

I’m not so sure. My conclusions were uninformed, but, on the other hand, I did present a lot of good data.

Somehow, at the time, I thought that a mastery of the data made a person a specialist. After all, the charts and graphs on enrollment, literacy, curriculum, etc., along with pronouncements from the government, were not easy to find. In those days, most people interested in Japanese government policy and data spent a lot of time—and money—at the Japanese Government Publications Service Center in Tokyo. As an aspiring specialist on Japanese education, I gathered, translated, and synthesized a lot of information. But the problem with my talk on preschools was that I’d never seen the inside of a school. I had made no observations, had no conversations.

Thinking back on my early graduate school experience and the changes that have taken place since then, I wonder how I would have approached my topic with all the resources of the internet available to me. The data and other information I used to gather at the Government Publications Service Center are now all accessible with a click or two. As for observation, I could easily find hundreds of photos and dozens of videos showing the inside of preschools in Japan. But how would someone who had never set foot in one sort through all these resources?

Since 1980, scholarship on Japanese education has produced a multitude of excellent studies. Lewis’s article and subsequent book, *Educating Hearts and Minds*; the work of Joe Tobin et al.; and Susan Holloway, among others, offer carefully researched impressions and conclusions about early childhood education in Japan. But there are also a lot of blogs, posts, videos, and other “information” out there that remind me of my graduate school talk: people sharing first impressions, making sweeping generalizations, and repeating faulty conventional wisdom. How do we know which internet voices are worth our attention?

I didn’t have much to work with in preparation for my Detroit talk, but that didn’t keep me from stating my opinions with confidence. Had the internet been available at the time, I’m sure I would have posted a video of my talk. And hard as I might have tried to retract it later, I likely would have suffered its embarrassment for many years.

Where do these few words of graduate school reflection leave me? I’m certainly glad that there are no videos or transcripts of my talk. But more important, I’m grateful for publications like *Education About Asia* that sort through the clutter and point us to solid scholarship, websites, blogs, and other things that are helpful to people who enjoy learning and teaching about Asia. And there are great videos, too. Thankfully, none of me. ■

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