

FILM REVIEWS

Schools of Thought

Teaching Children in America and Japan

PRODUCED BY OREGON PUBLIC BROADCASTING
FILMS FOR THE HUMANITIES & SCIENCES
P.O. BOX 2053
PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY 08543
800-257-5126
1994. 55 MINUTES

S*chools of Thought* contains two twenty-five to thirty minute documentaries, one by an Oregon television crew visiting Japanese schools and the other by a Japanese crew visiting schools in Oregon. According to the narrator, the goal of the project is to explore "efforts in both countries to balance creativity and discipline in education." The producers begin with the assumption that creativity and discipline exist at opposite extremes. Schools, they imply, must try to achieve a "balance" by dividing their time between these two opposites. They conclude that in Japan most

schools are disciplined, but few are creative, and in the U.S. schools alternate between teaching courses that are creative and those that are disciplined. Unfortunately, by defining creativity and discipline as a dichotomy, the producers fail to notice the way these two concepts complement each other.

To illustrate the disciplined nature of Japanese education, the program presents two male students on the fast track to success. According to the narrator, the high school boy's school work leaves him with "... no time for TV or hanging around with friends. He has many more hours in front of the books, hun-

more creativity in Japan. School apparently was too structured for these creative students.

The only place the American TV crew finds creativity is in experimental schools. One example is a small Tokyo institution for students who have refused to attend regular schools. The other is an expensive, private school. Both schools emphasize giving students the freedom to follow their own initiative. The producers, again emphasizing the dichotomy, imply that in these schools creativity exists in the absence of discipline. During subsequent interviews, however, Japanese students and teachers seem to present a different view of the relationship between discipline and creativity. A cram school owner says that "at first one should memorize, then creativity follows. I don't think very small children possess creativity." A high school senior adds, "I'm not sure creativity can be taught. ... To me, it means finding your own goal and developing it yourself." A teacher says that discipline helps teach creativity. It gives a student control, and that control gives him freedom to try new things. These quotes illustrate a common Japanese understanding of creativity: it arises out of sustained effort to master fundamental skills and processes. In the Japanese traditional arts and crafts, for instance, a student often spends the first few years copying models made by the teacher. Creativity gradually emerges out of this repetitive practice. The producers of the video should have looked for this merging of creativity and discipline in the schools they visited. Instead, they assume creativity cannot exist in more traditional schools, and they only find it in non-traditional settings.

In the second half of the tape, the television crew from

Shizuoka explores schools in the Portland, Oregon area. For the Japanese, the most striking difference between the systems exists on the streets around American schools. Guns, drugs, violence, and poverty, they point out, are problems "eroding social morality and affecting schools directly." As a result, American schools must teach courses on safety and drug/alcohol awareness. In addition, because increasing numbers of high school students are having babies, home economics classes focus on parenting skills. The proliferation of these non-academic electives, the producers note, may explain the decline in basic skill levels in the U.S. But later they learn from American teachers that these courses are necessary to keep recalcitrant students in school. So the producers conclude that Americans try to foster creativity and also teach basic skills. Here, too, creativity is the opposite of discipline. It exists in the elective, but not in the basic-skills courses.

At the end of the segment, an American teacher explains: "I never say, 'do it this way.' We don't teach students. They teach us." The Japanese narrator notes that the Japanese system is based on the teacher teaching students right ways to do things. These two statements reflect creativity and discipline as seen in the popular culture of each country. But they should not lead to the conclusion that American schools are creative and Japanese schools are disciplined. The American teacher gives her students freedom to be creative, but she assumes they will also learn discipline through their efforts. And the Japanese teacher, focusing on "right ways to do things," assumes that creativity will follow. In each case, creativity and discipline are complementary. How they complement each other is a topic worth pursuing.

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dreds of practice exams, and many nights of very little sleep." The junior high school student returns home from school at 3:00, "... but his day is only half complete." He must spend the rest of his waking hours studying for his entrance examination. In contrast to these highly-disciplined students, the video presents two other young men who dropped out after junior high school. One is now working as a welder; the other as a chef. These two examples point to the need for less discipline and

Unfortunately, the video misses the opportunity.

Could this video be useful in high school or undergraduate courses? Yes. The instructor could show it to illustrate the complexity of interpreting another culture's educational system. For instance, the preconceptions of the producers might have influenced their observations. The U.S. television crew may have arrived in Japan with the view that Japanese education is rigid and overly disciplined, and the Japanese crew probably assumed that U.S. education was troubled and chaotic. Further complications arose during interviews because terms such as creativity carry different meanings for educators in different countries. Together, these factors may have prevented the producers from moving beyond the initial assumption that creativity and discipline

are a dichotomy. The video, if presented carefully, could make American students of Japan more sensitive to these subtleties. ■

NOTE

Before showing the film, the instructor may want to read Catherine Lewis's chapter, "Creativity in Japanese Education," in *Japanese Educational Productivity*, edited by Robert Leestma and Herbert J. Walberg. Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, The University of Michigan, 1992.

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