

# Education and Childhood in Japan: Lessons to Be Learned?

Merry White

*The Japanese Educational Challenge: A Commitment to Children*  
New York: Free Press, 1987. 210 pp.  
\$18.95

Harold W. Stevenson, Hiroshi Azuma,  
and Kenji Hakuta (Eds.)  
*Child Development and Education  
in Japan*

New York: Freeman, 1986. 315 pp.  
ISBN 0-7167-1740-9 (hardcover);  
0-7167-1741-7 (paperback).  
\$24.95 hardcover; \$14.95 paperback

Review by

Daniel A. Wagner

*Merry White, associate professor of sociology at Boston University (Massachusetts), is author of The Japanese Overseas. ■ Harold W. Stevenson, professor of psychology at the University of Michigan (Ann Arbor), is coauthor, with Q. C. Jing, of Issues in Cognition and an advisory editor for Contemporary Psychology. ■ Hiroshi Azuma is a faculty member of Bunkyo-Ku University (Tokyo, Japan). He is coauthor, with R. Hess and K. Kashiwagi, of Hahaoya No Taïdo To Kodomo No Chiteki Hattatsu (Mother's Behavior and Children's Cognitive Development). ■ Kenji Hakuta, professor of education and psychology at the University of California, Santa Cruz, is author of Mirror of Language: The Debate on Bilingualism. ■ Daniel A. Wagner, professor of education and director of the Literacy Research Center at the University of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia), is editor of The Future of Literacy in a Changing World.*

America's increased concern about its economic productivity has led government and public officials to start searching for policy responses. Some suggest economic remedies tied to interest rates, tariffs, and the like. Others have sought to link the current malaise with a number of differences that distinguish America from its most obvious economic rival, Japan. Representing the latter perspective, the former Secretary of Education, William Bennett, has suggested that it is education that is the critical factor in producing different human capital between these two industrial powers. He, and many others, claim that the Japanese culture in general, and Japanese education in particular, provide the sort of stimulation that leads to higher rates of literacy, greater mathematical achievement, more social control in the classroom, and, subsequently, a more productive work force.

It is because of this genuine public concern about, and interest in, Japanese culture and education that the volumes by White and by Stevenson, Azuma, and Hakuta are especially welcome at this time. It is useful to review them together,

as they complement one another. The White volume provides a well-integrated overview of Japanese culture as it relates to child development and education, drawing on a wide variety of indigenous as well as exogenous accounts, interspersed with relevant research findings. The second volume presents an up-to-date collection of some of the most active contemporary scholars dealing with these same issues, from a social science perspective. Where both volumes cover the same territory—such as the history of Japanese education and the high motivation of Japanese children—they are in considerable agreement with one another. Japanese culture and the Japanese child are seen as exceptionally congruent and homogeneous in a world (read Western world) more often characterized by heterogeneity in class, language, ethnicity, and life-styles.

According to White, it is the cultural ideology of the Japanese, rather than the educational system itself, that is the principal reason for the success of Japanese children in school. She argues that Japanese culture has evolved in such a way that both the idealized "good

mother" and "good child" are concepts that remain very much in practice in contemporary Japan. The Japanese good mother (*ryosai kenbo*) is expected to be completely devoted to the child, giving unconditional love and affection. Although such devotion has been said to create excessive dependency in the child, it is also clear that the Japanese mother's attention may have important pedagogical consequences, even when transplanted to America:

In Riverdale, New York, where there is a sizeable Japanese population, school administrators recently noticed that the Japanese families were purchasing two sets of textbooks for each child. They soon discovered that one set was for the mother, who would study one or more lessons ahead of her child to help him or her in schoolwork. The result was that Japanese children who entered school in September knowing little or no English often finished in June at the top of the class in all subjects. (p. 14)

In *The Japanese Educational Challenge*, White guides us through Japanese cultural history, home values, and educational system, all the while making comparisons to the West. Her descriptions of real children and real parents contrast, of course, with the more empiricist tendencies of the volume by Stevenson et al. Hers is ethnography with a clear focus on children's learning, both rich in detail and often wonderfully well written. We see, for example, that how children learn the traditional Japanese tea ceremony is as representative of understanding "the way" as is the construction of automobiles. "[T]he moral force of method is greater than quantifiable result. Thus, even small children are taught that you fold the paper 'exactly so,' you cut precisely along the line, you place your shoes exactly parallel and in just the right spot near the door" (p. 99). This attention to, and concern for, precision seems to contrast with American attitudes such as "the bottom line is what counts" or "let's not worry about the details." No doubt each cultural perspective has its pros and cons, but what is not in doubt is that the differences are real and permeate home, school, and work life.

Many Western educators are now familiar with the Japanese *juku* or extra-curricular schools, which are attended by large numbers of school-age children so they can do better in nationwide exams. Many think these *juku* schools account for the Japanese child's success. However, some wonder about the impact of such pressure for school achievement. As

pointed out in Inagaki's chapter in Stevenson et al., there may very well be negative consequences to these pressures, such as the documented increase in secondary school violence in Japan. White is careful on this point and provides a convincing analysis of how cultural forms can mediate and attenuate what would seem, on the face of it, to be the "downside" of Japanese achievement:

If a child does not do well, he [or she] is spared the feeling that the failure was his [or her] fault, that he [or she] is somehow inferior to those who did do well. . . . [b]ecause the Japanese believe that examinations measure only "abilities," which are regarded as separate from the child's "real" self. And so, despite falling short of the mark, the child's identity and feeling of self-worth normally remain unscathed. Moreover, the support and active assistance of the mother and teacher help deflect responsibility from the child; they all suffer, one might say, a "team defeat." Failure is most keenly felt by the mother, who takes the blame upon herself and will often sequester herself at home for weeks, ashamed to go out. (pp. 144-145)

*Child Development and Education in Japan*, provides less poignant examples and personal vignettes, but more empirically based research. Due to the sheer number of chapters—19 in all—it is difficult to summarize this volume. The majority of the chapters are written by Japanese scholars. These chapters range from historical and sociological sketches to complex cross-national comparisons of school achievement. Some chapters, such as those by Azuma; Befu; Yamamura; and Kojima, provide further insights into the nature of Japanese society by making reference to concepts that contrast with the American experience, such as the following:

It used to be said [in Japan] that to become a mature person, a person has "to eat someone else's rice," that is, to be away from home and living in a setting where it is necessary to defer to others and to endure psychological and physical hardships. (p. 24)

White and LeVine point out in their contribution that Japanese parents are expected to spoil their children, but not completely: "Parents are there to support and aid the child against hardships" (p. 59) but not to help the child escape such hardships. They conclude with an important educational implication: that, in contrast to the Japanese school, the American "school has not provided an environment in which our ideologies of child development and the actual qualities valued in the child can be inculcated" (p.

61). Again, we see the importance of Japanese homogeneity and congruence between cultural institutions.

When social scientists have been asked to determine the factors that lead to the superiority of Japanese education, they often search for cultural dimensions of Japanese parenting or personality, such as those noted above. Others, such as Kuno's chapter on Japanese syntax and Makita's (1968) claim that reading disabilities simply do not exist in Japan draw attention to linguistic aspects of the question. Yet, as part of a major trilingual (Taiwan, Japan, United States) comparative study of reading and mathematics achievement, Stevenson et al. demonstrated that Makita's proposition—that Japanese literacy is simply easier to learn—was unfounded: Stevenson et al. found that the proportion of children reading two grade levels behind the norm (the definition of a "disability") was just as great in Japan as in the United States. Another part of Stevenson et al.'s study, on mathematics achievement, showed Japanese children clearly more advanced than American children in both first and fifth grades. In a series of brief but convincing logical steps, Stevenson et al. demonstrate why curriculum, parental education, teacher training, and intelligence can be ruled out as causes of these differences in math achievement. The simple and probable truth is that Japanese children spend 25% more days in class, use 100% more time on mathematics learning in first grade, and pay much more attention to the teacher (as measured in a coded observation study) than do American children. As they put it, "[L]earning requires time and practice. When either is reduced, it is impaired" (p. 215). This is a sparse conclusion with potential implications for American education.

Among the many other chapters in Stevenson et al., this reviewer found particularly interesting the chapter by Hess et al., which provides an interesting look at attribution theory applied to the Japanese context, and Hatano's chapter on the building of expertise. Lewis's chapter on social development is helpful in pointing to certain aspects of Japanese social life, such as peer management, which have received very little attention in the United States. Also of interest is her commentary for Westerners on the practical aspects of doing research in Japan. Lewis provides valuable insights on the nature of debt and gratitude vis-à-vis Japanese colleagues, and how difficult it is, for these and related reasons, to obtain crit-

ical feedback in Japan. While often left out of discussions of cross-cultural research, such practical hints are a useful addition to the volume.

So, what of the title of this review? Are there lessons to be learned? From a cultural perspective, the balance of the evidence from both volumes suggests that Japanese children really do learn more (and earlier) in two school subjects—mathematics and early reading. Although earlier claims that Japanese children do not suffer from serious reading difficulties have been shown to be erroneous, there is, nonetheless, a sense from both volumes that Japanese child development, educational achievement, and economic productivity are indeed linked.

A next set of questions follows. Can American educators apply the principles of Japanese education to the American classroom? William Bennett, as noted earlier, has suggested in numerous speeches that classroom size is not an important variable in determining school quality, because Japanese classrooms are larger and teachers are still able to maintain social control and excellent learning conditions. According to White, such a direct transfer to American education is doomed to failure, because "the directed enthusiasm of the Japanese classroom is a product of the [special] relationship between teacher and students. . . . [T]o improve classroom performance, the Japanese and Americans may not always be able to rely on the same things" (p. 180).

Both volumes point to the centrality of childhood and education in Japanese society. Parents are devoted to their children's learning, teachers are among the most respected professionals, and the children themselves are highly (even some Japanese would say *excessively*) motivated to achieve. While one can come to understand a great deal about the differences between Japan and the United States from volumes such as these, deriving policy conclusions is a more difficult task. Cultures are, by their nature, resistant to change. The differences between the Japanese and the Americans are fundamental and deep, both offering a complexity and richness that will feed cross-cultural researchers for decades to come. These two excellent volumes will hopefully reinforce efforts to understand ourselves by better understanding our global neighborhood.

#### Reference

- Makita, K. (1968). The rarity of reading disability in Japanese children. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 38, 599-614.