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“Performance” and “morality” as main goals of elementary schools in Japan

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Abstract

The article is devoted to the peculiarities of school education in modern Japan. In particular, the content of the Japanese curriculum for elementary schools is considered. Special attention is paid to the differences between the current school systems in Japan and in Western countries. The main educational goals approved by the state authorities in Japan are analyzed.

Keywords: educational goals, non-academic subjects in Japan, “performance” as a type of skill, school education in Japan, the curriculum in Japanese elementary schools.

1. Introduction

A Japanese first grader perceives the beginning of schooling with great responsibility. It is natural for him to express at once his commitment to the educational process, to his teachers and classmates and to his own growth as a person. And almost every first-grader rises to that next step of his life as a “Tabula Rasa”, since the pre-school education, which he has just received, is mostly focused on primary socialization of him as a person, and not on obtaining the skills and abilities required for further learning.

The very first day (and in Japan the beginning of academic year falls on April, 1), a teacher greets all the “recruits”, emphasizes that they are going to work hard, but there will certainly be fun throughout the learning process.

But why are the Japanese so eager to learn and to do their duty? “The cultural values of Japan and its purpose as a country always assumed that “a good person” is a person who studied and that “teaching” and “learning” are major virtues” (Gusarova, 2014).

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2. Method

The purpose of this study is to determine and to clue the peculiarities of the educational process in Japanese elementary schools by analyzing the content of the curriculum.

The condition of school education in Japan has been researched by such scientists as White, Joseph, Hale, Molodyakova, Prasol, Zvereva, Murayama, Muravyova, Kochkina et al. (2008). There are also works of Ukrainian educators dedicated to this subject authored by Kurinna, Bibko, Sverdlova, Dzhurinsky et al.

3. The peculiarities of the curriculum in Japanese elementary schools

On the second day of the beginning of the learning process a first grader is above all stimulated to performances in front of an audience. This is one of the goals that teachers are trying to achieve and to improve whilst students' learning at school (White, 1988). Children are explained that when they are called for an oral answer, it is important to speak confidently, clearly and loudly as each correctly processed speech will serve them for the benefit of further education, work and different life situations.

Of course, this may sound paradoxical to westerners, mainly because they are convinced that Japanese children are not sufficiently encouraged to develop independent opinions, to express their own views and to create a strong individualistic image. In favor of this common assumption it is reasonable to quote from the study of Moxon: “the Japanese are rather to speak in brief than say nothing in order to avoid possible embarrassment ... Unlike the western system of education where students are encouraged to show individuality and initiative, the atmosphere in the Japanese class is always focused around “groupism” and “collectiveness”. Groups play an important role in all aspects of Japanese society” (Moxon, 2009).

However, we believe that, in fact, Japanese children are much better trained for such kind of activity as oral presentation in front of an audience of students, compared with students in Western countries and Ukraine as well. This hypothesis is based on the fact that the actual “performance” in Japanese schooling is singled out and defined as a skill that each student can acquire and develop. But Japanese educators believe that the main approach to the formation of such skill is separation in student’s mind of his responsible attitude to the content of the material to be reported from the actual “ability to speak”. This approach is justified and, in our opinion, is effective, since first a student learns “how to act” and only then “what to speak about”.

In other words, when student’s mind is devoid of the need to express his opinion, he focuses on the process of performance: how to speak well, confidently and convincingly.

Another discrepancy between the Japanese elementary school curriculum and the curriculum of any Western country is that Japanese first graders also have a separate class which is called self-reliance (White, 1988). It can also cause a lot of questions among teachers: isn’t there too much “adultish” in what a child who has just started to learn is supposed to be taught? However, the structure of the non-academic course is designed in detail and provides a slow formation of the skill to “self-rely”. Thus, the content of this class is to perform some small and carefully distributed tasks. Only after a teacher is satisfied with the results (that is when the technique of the task of a similar type is well absorbed by students) he proceeds to the next task type. The ultimate goal of a “self-reliance” class is to develop the ability for self motivation.

According to the Basic Law on Education the key educational goals are the following: “Education should be such that, while aiming the formation of a harmoniously developed personality, physically healthy independent citizens would be brought up, who would embody the builders of the peaceful state and society, respect for law and justice, value rights and dignity, and respect work and duty” (as cited in Boyarchyuk, 1994).

In our opinion, one of the most notable and noteworthy differences between the Japanese school curriculum and the curricula of western countries (including Ukraine) is a separate class of morality. Its main objective is to educate the members of national and international community.

For instance, in Japanese elementary and primary schools there are special “hours of morality” (Dzhurinsky, 2007; Kochkina, 2008). In addition, lessons and extracurricular activities are held by using a variety of teaching materials and types of activities; in particular, that is reading short stories, poetry, writing compositions, watching educative videos, listening to audio recordings, interviews, children's performances.

We believe that one of the conditions of this established system of moral education is the creation of the Institute of national morals and culture in 1932 (Zvereva, 2008), which served as an ideological apparatus in nationalistic Japan of that time (the end of World War II). Here are some excerpts from its program: “Japanese spirit and respect for
parents should be especially inspired to the students of primary school; teaching of history should form love and devotion to Japanese political and social public system” (as cited in Zvereva, 2008). But, of course, the functions of the institution were subsequently revised, and now every ten years its principles are fully revised and re-confirmed.

Furthermore social studies, which are aimed to give knowledge in the fields of geography, history, ethnography and home science, in combination with moral courses assume political education of children.

According to the statistics, Japan’s crime rate among children is comparatively low and decreasing year by year. Thus, during the 1990-2010 decades, the number of children taken into custody on illegal behavior decreased from 28160 children in 1990 to 17727 in 2010 (Japan Statistical Yearbook, 2013, Ch.25, Table 25-4). Children of illegal behavior refer here to juveniles under 14 years old who acted against the criminal laws. Therefore, we suppose that a well-structured and well-organized educational system of Japan, including the content of national curriculum and moral courses in it, is the basic prerequisite of the shown data. For instance, to prevent crimes and delinquency of pupils the Ministry of Education of Japan first delivered a special directive to chiefs of education, boards of education, governors of municipalities and prefectures on Nov 25, 1980. The original name of the document is Jido Seito no Hiko no Boshi ni tsuite which is translated precisely as Ministry of Education Directive Concerning the Prevention Delinquency of Pupils (Beauchamp, 1994). The document outlines the rise in delinquency of pupils of that period and is aimed to stimulate consideration of the matter and to provide further guidance in prevention of delinquency of pupils. We believe that the release of this document was one more little step of Japan in the sphere of education on its way of improvement.

4. Conclusion

Nevertheless the content of moral education may vary in each school with regard to the situation in the area (this may be a large number of minorities, disasters, etc.). School curriculum includes three types of mandatory training activities: academic disciplines, moral education and extracurricular activities. And, as it has been noted, elementary school has a separate class of “self-reliance”.

Thus among all the features of the educational process in modern Japanese schools it is possible to mark out the following:
- The formation of the ability to “speak” starting from the first year of studying at school;
- The presence in elementary school curriculum of a separate class of “self-reliance”;
- The presence in elementary and secondary school curriculum of a separate class “morality”;
- Serious attitude to the process of learning by the Japanese has been formed for centuries and is a prerequisite for high rates of Japan in the sphere of education.

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