DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 420 601 SO 028 831

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TITLE Japanese Students: What American Teachers Encounter.
PUB DATE 1997-00-00
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, March 24-28, 1997).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Asian Studies; Cross Cultural Studies; Cultural Differences; *Cultural Influences; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; *Group Behavior; *Group Dynamics; *Japanese Culture; Social Differences; *Stereotypes; *Teacher Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS *Japan

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the presence of "groupism" in Japan; that is, the phenomenon that youth in Japan are seen in groups and very seldom alone. The text focuses on "groupism" and what that means for schooling practices in both Japan and the United States. Cultural comparisons between the two countries examine the typical classrooms, social control of the group, and cultural beliefs that stress the stability of the group as contrasted to the development of individuality of students. (EH)

Japanese Students: What American Teachers Encounter

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Today one of the critical concerns in California is class size. In Japan, however, one of the first things American teachers encounter is large class size. Associated with this class size, is the interesting observation of groupism. Youth in Japan are seen in groups and very seldom alone. Individualism as experienced in American schools is absent in Japanese schools. My presentation focuses on groupism and what I think that means for schooling practices.

For the American teacher, groupism is most impressionable when encountering a large group of young males. Wilson (1993) explains why there is a reaction. "From time to time we forget that young men in groups are always a potential challenge to social order, and we are surprised when they appear in places that we think of as tranquil and civilized" (p. 174). How are Japanese educational experiences structured to avoid this potential challenge to social order?

First, there is a reason why groupism becomes so pronounced in Japanese school experiences. Tobin, Wu and Davidson (1989) document how groupism is reflected from pre-school through the rest of the schooling levels in the education of Japanese youth. The explanation they offer is that school, "facilitates the child's transition from the dyadic world of home to the more complex world of school and society by offering a program carefully structured to limit face-to-face, emotionally intense interactions between children and teachers." Thus, when Japanese students and American teachers encounter each other, it is to establish a relationship of interdependence and group-orientation rather than one of independence and self-orientation.

Tobin, et al. (1989) explain that "in contemporary Japan, children learn dyadic relations at home and group relations at school, and that the role of schools is to transform dependent, selfish toddlers into group-minded youngsters ready to function in a group-oriented school system and society" (pp. 70-71).

The development of groupism takes many forms. In schools, students are identified as a group through symbols. Students wear uniforms associated with their school and are given pins, name tags, and signs to place over shoe lockers, cubbies, and classroom doors.

Classes in Japan average 42 children for one teacher. These classes call for order and control. Rohlan (1983) explains that time and movement serve to preserve order. He writes, "School schedules teach that the regularity of things has no individual exceptions. Order is based on the group. Everyone in a homeroom, a grade, and a school marches to the appropriate time. Students are reminded that the central feature of their lives is school. Vacations and weekends are short and invaded by schoolwork. From class to class and year to year, all the time available is filled. Educational scheduling is intense. And nearly all class time is strictly academic" (pp. 167-168). Students remain at the same desks in the same classroom virtually all day. When a period ends, the great hourly reshuffling so central to the American experience of high school is simply unknown" (p. 179).

Japanese teachers, on the other hand, don't have their own classrooms. Instead, they keep their materials in a common room and from there they move to the various classrooms. Rohlen (1983) describes it as "The single large teacher's room in Japanese schools is in fact the social nerve center of the school" (p. 177). As stated above, Japanese schools are large and therefore noisy. They tend to average 42 children for one teacher.

This structure appears unworkable for American teachers, but it does work in Japan. Japanese teachers delegate more authority to children, intervene less quickly in arguments, have lower expectations for the control of noise, give fewer verbal cues, organize more structured large-group activities, and finally make more use of peer-group approval and control and less of teacher's direct influence. In brief, the classroom structure in Japanese classes tends to emphasize process, engagement, and commitment rather than discipline and outcome (White, 1987).

Japanese standards are manifested in Japanese classrooms in ways that are dependent on their classrooms. School children know what tasks to complete, what materials to use, and they understand what they must have in order to have a place in a certain high school and university. These expectations lead to emphasizing children's similarities and to resisting tracking by ability. As White (1987) put it, "Japanese children know what is expected of them, and they also know that to achieve it they must work hard as individuals. They also know that invidious public comparisons between themselves and others who are more able will not be made in the classroom" (p. 183).

What is beyond the classroom that contributes to the social control of groupism among Japanese youth? I will describe the high school as an example. Japanese high schools are a "sober introduction to adulthood"; the "school buildings [are] like military barracks" (Rohlen, 1983, p. 145). The principal's office, in contrast, is a place with a coffee table daintily covered with white crocheted doilies. When I visited the high schools in Nishinomiya we were graciously served green tea and cookies by a young lady in white gloves. The principal subsequently joined us. The formality and quietness is a dramatic

reminder of the differences between the world of adults and the world of youth.

But the social control is not limited to the physical characteristics of the place of schooling. Social order is regulated through the pervasive patterns of interaction. Gudykunst and Nishida (1993) and Yamada (1990) show how order is established through interaction. They report that Japanese "take short turns, distribute their turns relatively evenly, and continue to distribute their turns regardless of who initiates a topic" while they converse. This differs from North Americans who "take long monologic turns, distribute their turns unevenly, and the participant who initiates a topic characteristically takes the highest proportion of turns in that topic." From this one would expect that classroom interaction would be regularized so that the lesson structure would differ from the initiation, response, evaluation (IRE) structure so common in American classrooms.

Associated with this practice, Gudykunst and Nishida (1993) claim that members of collectivistic or groupism cultures "use strategies that are altruistic and those based in duty more than members of individualistic cultures. They believe that "North Americans are more likely to threaten, give ultimatums and direct requests." What Japanese homes and schools teach is what White (1987) refers to as "Japanese common sense," which is a "moral construct [which] contains both ways of relating socially to others and a physical common sense learned in school" (p. 16).

Groupism in schools is supported through the belief that "learning is a moral activity" (White, 1987, p. 47). The skills that count are: 1) learning to gather and use large amounts of information; 2) learning to work diligently and in an organized manner; 3) learning to do things with sincerity or wholeheartedness or singlemindedness; 4) learning to be a quick

study; 5) learning to develop kan, that is, intuition, premonition, natural knack for doing things, inspiration, and a fast realization for what is needed for a task. These requirements over the life of a Japanese youth inculcate, diligence, endurance, ability to decide to do the hard thing, wholehearted dedication, and cooperativeness. In Japan children don't drop out of school because "what is most wanted out of life -stability, security and support- are acquired through effort and commitment. This lesson is taught at home and at school.

White (1987) claims that "study, and work of any kind teaches one about engagement, which has always been the real agenda of learning in Japan" (p. 52). The associated implication is that "When engaged effort is valued over ability, the environment of study or work is more truly egalitarian then it would be if the ceiling on a person's efficacy were set by ability alone" (White, 1987, p. 52).

Thus, American teachers encounter and are intimidated by large groups of Japanese students because of their American experience, but soon discover that the Japanese educational experience is designed to avoid the challenge to social order. Groupism in Japan is a structure of social order among its youth and citizenry.

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