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The Purpose of Schooling in the United States and Nagasaki**

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米国と長崎での教育の目的

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Abstract

This brief study examines the purpose of schooling in the United States and offers a comparison with the observed purpose of schooling in Nagasaki, Japan. The author reflects on her experience as an Assistant Language Teacher and draws upon both her experiences in and research of the public schooling system to draw conclusions about the fundamental purposes of each respective education system. Through this process, the author outlines the importance of “21st century skills” as they relate to equity in education and social mobility.

本稿では、米国での教育の目的を検討し、筆者が日本の長崎市で教員として経験した教育の目的との比較を行う。さらに、「21世紀のスキル」が教育とソーシャルモビリティの公平性に関連していることの重要性について概説する。

Keywords

Schooling, 21st Century Skills, Social Mobility, Japanese Schools, K-12 Education, Equity
教育、21世紀のスキル、社会的流動性、日本の中学校、公平性

The Purpose of Schooling

Schools in the United States today serve a population of students from diverse racial, ethnic, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds. Within this social context, schools have the responsibility to provide all students with fair and equitable education - that is, an education that strives to reduce the disparities created by societal inequalities by making accommodations and compensations that allow each student access to the same opportunities. By upholding equitable practices, setting high expectations for all students, and providing students with the necessary support to meet those expectations, schools demonstrate excellent practices. The purpose of schooling throughout the United States should be to equip students from all backgrounds and social statuses with critical foundational skills, both cognitive and technological, that are necessary for them to engage with the current economic system and gain access to opportunities for social mobility.

Schooling in the United States should serve as a means for students to develop extensive knowledge and gain fundamental skills and competencies that allow them to transition into society prepared to move between social strata. As a result of schooling, each student should be prepared to choose a path that will allow him or her to enter social and economic spaces that may have previously been inaccessible due to barriers established by class-based inequalities. Frank Levy and Richard Munane (2013) argue that in recent years “education moved from being one source of upward mobility (along with generally rising earnings) to the main source of upward mobility” (p. 1), and therefore schools must ensure that students from low-income families are granted access to the same jobs and resources as students from wealthy families. In order to accomplish this, schools must not only impart knowledge that lays the foundation for more advanced learning, they must also equip each student with a set of critical yet intangible skills before they enter society as adults.

Not unlike the practices of today, schools should impart foundational knowledge - math, science, English, and history- in order for students to both meet the requirements for college admission and to interact on the most basic level with the world around them. Along with this fundamental knowledge, schools must also impart a critical set of competencies that will allow students to interact with others and thrive in social and work spaces as they exist today. As illustrated in *Partnership for 21st Century Learning* (2015), it is simply not enough for students to retain content knowledge as taught in math, science, or history classes; “students must also learn the essential skills for success in today’s world, such as critical thinking, problem solving, communication in collaboration” (p. 1). This particular set of competencies is often referred to as “21st century skills” as they are applicable to the unique working and learning styles of today. They include, but are not limited to, the ability to think creatively, the ability to effectively make analysis-based decisions, the ability to masterfully give and receive feedback, and the ability to work respectfully with others (p. 2-9). The entire school community must be active in seeing that all students acquire these skills in order to be better prepared to transition into life beyond high school, whether they seek higher education or employment.

As previously mentioned, *Partnership for 21st Century Learning* (2015) also identifies the ability to effectively use and apply methods of technology as one of the many “21st century skills”. Within twelve years of schooling, students should acquire a solid grasp of technology and understand the ways it is used in professional and educational settings. Students must be prepared to embark upon a society that is highly technological. As Chris Dede (2014) explains his study entitled *The Role of Technologies in Deeper Learning*, students who have developed technological literacy are able to “be more responsive to the opportunities and challenges of a global, knowledge-based, innovation-centered civilization” (p. 6). He continues, “if used strategically and in concert, [technologies] can help prepare students for life and work in the 21st century, mirroring in the classroom some powerful methods of learning and doing that pervade the rest of society” (p. 6). Educators in schools, urban and rural alike must incorporate the use of technology into their pedagogy, encouraging students to hone invaluable technological skills. Schools must also understand that even in this highly technological

age, computer literacy is not universal - not all students begin their first year of schooling with knowledge of computers and other technologies. Accordingly, schools must ensure that every student, rich or poor, completes schooling able to use technology in a way that allows them to flourish in places of work and higher education.

Considering the schools I attended as a student, I believe that they prepared me for life after graduation by offering access to high-quality education, imparting critical foundational skills, and thus providing a path for upward mobility. I attended schools that appeared to have confidence in so-called “21 st century skills”, as they integrated them into many lessons and activities. At school, I was encouraged to collaborate with peers, explore and understand cultures other than my own, and communicate in an articulate manner, which I believe laid the groundwork for my successes in college and at various workplaces. The schools I attended also integrated the use of technology into the classroom, not only for students’ use, but also into methods of instruction. I strongly believe this eased my transition into higher education and prepared me to enter workplaces that required constant use of technology.

Some might argue that by designing schools with the goal of paving pathways for social mobility, students may naturally come to view education and their accumulated knowledge as a commodity. Some might support Labaree (1997) in his argument expressing that when both schools and students focus on accessing opportunities that allow social mobility, “the primary aim is to exchange one’s education for something more substantial-namely, a job, which will provide the holder with a comfortable standard of living, financial security, social power, and cultural prestige” (p. 55). That is to say, schools would cease to exist as a place for students to explore their interests and academic strengths, but instead would become a place for students to understand the ways in which education can best serve them in life. I would argue, however, that when schools deliberately integrate cognitive skills often referred to as “21 st century skills” into their culture and curriculum, schools inherently foster an appreciation for the pursuit of knowledge and the processes of learning in students.

Evaluation of a School

For three years, I taught English at three elementary schools in Nagasaki, Japan, the graduates of which attended the local junior high school where I also taught. For the purposes of this argument, this study focuses primarily on the schooling and education that takes place at junior high school.

The Japanese public school year began in April and finished the following March, meaning that students spent significantly more time in school than students attending public school in the United States. While students were allowed vacations in between trimesters, I found that many spent their vacation time at school to participate in club activities or to train with sports teams. The typical school day itself was often very long, beginning when students walked to school and ending after off-site “cram school”¹, where students received supplementary tutoring for school subjects and entrance examinations, often until 10:00 pm or later. The reasons for carrying out such long school days had

never been explicitly explained to me, however I deduced that keeping students in school for long hours served two distinct purposes - to provide rigorous academics and supervision to students whose parents and guardians worked similarly long hours and to cultivate in students a strong work ethic. Perhaps theoretically, one could justify this by suggesting that students who learned to work hard in school, putting in extra hours, would continue to work hard throughout their lives.

Most of my students came from low-income, working-class families, many of whom often volunteered their free time to participate in school events. The student body was almost entirely ethnically Japanese, save a handful of students of non-Japanese Asian descent (this was rarely discussed openly) and mixed-race students. Every day, students wore dark blue and black naval-inspired uniforms, complete with socks that rose precisely three centimeters above the ankles. Students were required to neatly style their hair in a way that did not attract attention. During lessons, when called on to answer a question or offer an opinion, students often followed their answer by asking the entire class, "what do you think" to which students would most often reply in unison, "I agree". Whether or not students truly supported the idea, it appeared that the school had intended to foster a community with a strong group mentality and sense of uniformity among the student body. There is a well-known and often repeated saying in Japan which could be applied to the schooling that took place at that school; "the nail that sticks out gets hammered down". It highlights the fact that uniformity and sticking to the status quo were valued over individuality and risk-taking.

At junior high school, students studied math, science, social studies/history, Japanese, English, art (including industrial arts), music, home economics, and physical education. Students also received weekly moral education lessons, taught by their homeroom teachers. In these classes, students discussed the importance of teamwork, helping those in need, and other similar topics. Similar to the United States, these courses served to impart critical knowledge intended to prepare students as they pursue high school and higher education. It is important to note that high school education in Japan is not required. In fact, many of my own students did not continue on to high school, but instead found work as manual laborers at the age of sixteen. This fact alone contributes to my understanding that the most fundamental purpose of schooling at that junior high school was to prepare students to enter the workforce as morally driven, upstanding citizens with a strong work ethic, and perhaps the goal of social mobility was secondary.

For a moment, I would like to discuss the difficult transition students make from elementary school to junior high school. The difficult transition was most likely due to the drastically different purposes of schooling put into practice at the two levels of schooling. Similar to the way in which there was debate about whether schooling should serve the individual child or train the citizen in the early to mid-1900s in the United States (Reese, 2011, p. 149-151), a similar tension between the approaches of education arose between elementary and junior high school; the same issues were in conflict, but on a much smaller scale. At elementary school, along with their core subjects, the students learned how to play musical instruments, craft intricate and colorful art projects, build kites, care for pet rabbits, collect praying mantises, learn games from the olden-days from senior citizens in

the community, and learn to ride unicycles. Most importantly, students did not wear uniforms, immediately distinguishing them from their junior high school peers. Students were without a doubt afforded more room for self-expression and more freedom to discover their strengths and weaknesses. At elementary school, I believe the purpose of schooling was not unlike that of the schooling embraced by progressive school reformers in the United States in the 1900s who advocated for “the child to replace the academic subjects as the center of the educational experience” (p. 151). Elementary school was focused more heavily on developing the individual child and fostering relationships, rather than on instilling a strong work ethic as in junior high school.

As students entered junior high school for the first time, they were abruptly introduced to a different approach to schooling. Beginning almost immediately, students endured copious amounts of testing - both evaluative and practice testing in preparation for high school entrance exams. During lessons, the classroom instruction and learning I observed was centered around memorization and student recitation, rather than creative thinking, as one might hope to see in classrooms in the United States today. Much of the content taught to students was also taught in direct preparation for high school entrance exams. Additionally, students entering junior high school wore uniforms for the first time - a drastic change from their wildly patterned, brightly colored outfits of elementary school. This transition to rigid uniforms, I would argue, served to prepare students for the protocol of Japanese workplaces, many of which require employees to wear uniforms or a simple suit. This further strengthened my interpretation that the junior high school at which I taught applied a “social efficiency” approach to schooling, as described in depth in *Public Goods, Private Goods*. Labaree (1997) argues that with social efficiency approaches to schooling, the “economic well-being depends on our ability to prepare the young to carry out useful economic roles with competence” (Labaree, p. 42), the training for which, one might argue, begins in junior high school in Nagasaki.

Path Forward

In order for the Nagasaki junior high school in question to align more closely with my suggested purpose of schooling, the issue must first be addressed as a technical problem before proceeding to implement solutions resulting in students’ acquisition of foundational skills and access to opportunities for social mobility. According to Heifetz, et al. (2009), technical challenges and problems “can be resolved through the application of authoritative expertise and through the organization’s current structures, procedures, and ways of doing things” (p. 19). The current structures in this situation would be school curriculum and teaching methods. I propose that the junior high school focus on teaching students the aforementioned “21st century skills”, and deliberately weaving them into all subject areas. Creative thinking and collaborative work should be just as much a part of schooling as test preparation.

While I was initially inclined to suggest an overall mindset change, or an “adaptive change” (p. 19), I recognize that this level of change would require a much larger, implausible cultural and systemic change. Both cultural values and workplace practices would be required to change in order to enable

the adaptive, mindset change. Knowing this, devising changes to curriculum and teaching style are the most possible means by which to bring the junior high school into alignment with my proposed purpose for schooling. Creative thinking and writing could be taught in Japanese language class; collaborative skills could be strengthened by way of group projects for history or science classes. These are examples of plausible, structural changes that would provide students with a foundational set of “21st century skills” and prepare them to leave school prepared to seize opportunities of social mobility, regardless of their socio-economic class. Knowing that companies around the world and in Japan have increasingly begun to embrace collaboration, risk-taking, and critical thinking, the acquisition of 21st century skills would allow the students of the Nagasaki junior high to seek and transition into places of work and higher education with ease.

¹ Known as *juku* in Japanese, cram schools are afterschool centers that offer goal-oriented examination preparation to students for a fee.

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