Japan's Educational System

Flavia Iuspa
Florida International University, USA

Abstract: This paper analyses the Japanese educational system through Hofstede's (1980) locus of control and social principledness' dimensions, and how those values got promulgated and reinforced through the different historical periods of the Japanese educational system.

Since educational systems were established, the purpose of schooling has always been defined in terms of its intrinsic values. They are knowledge for knowledge, transmission of social values, intended outcome, and holistic individual development. Moreover, educational policies and practices serve as a mirror of a society; they highlight what type of knowledge and values, or psychosocial factors, a country considers worthwhile, and how it ultimately socializes individuals. The Japanese education system is not an exception to this rule. Through its education system, Japanese citizens are introduced to a way of life that defines their everyday interactions in schools, family, as well as businesses practices.

At the same time, globalization is becoming an influential force in today's educational systems around the world. No country can afford to live in isolation anymore. Connectivity and interdependence is increasing (via electronic mail, media, travel accessibility, etc.), and people from cultures all around the world are interacting more than ever before. To enable citizens to function in a global society requires individuals open to diversity, creativity, risk taking (very important at the economic level), individualism, and most importantly, disagreements.

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in Japan is beginning to move towards this direction. In 1998, the MEXT's report, *To Cultivate Children's Sound Minds that Develop a New Era,* states that the there is a need for Japanese children to develop a more individualistic mindset and schools should promote children's goals and dreams. Through the future generations' creativity and entrepreneurship, economic development will be enhanced. As a result, the MEXT is promoting, within the schools and family groups, actions such as praising children's individuality by "avoiding comparison with others or worrying about their relative ranking from their early childhood" (MEXT, p. 5), or reading books to children that encourage the development of children's sound minds.

For the Japanese education system, the MEXT's reforms symbolize the first steps in educating citizens in behaviors that conflict with the long-protected Japanese cultural values of cooperation, loyalty, obedience, and group conformity. Reforming the educational system, hence, is one of Japan's most significant challenges ahead. As Kazuo (2001) states, "current reform is to do away with the roots of educational ills in Japan--i.e, uniformity, inflexibility, and lack of openness and internationalization" (p. 29).

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to present a macro-analysis of the Japanese educational structure through two dimensions of Hofstede's (1980) theoretical framework: social principledness and locus of control. As a result, the rationale for this paper is to examine how the Japanese educational system conveys the Japanese cultural values of cooperation, loyalty, obedience, and group conformity to students.

Theoretical Framework

From 1967 to 1973, psychologist Hofstede (1980) conducted one of the most significant research studies associating cultural values with workplace preferences. His study was designed to improve the management of culturally diverse employees, as he believed that people's behaviors were influenced by their own values, beliefs, or set of attitudes. Importantly, Hofstede (180) concluded, "people are programmed by their own cultures" (p. 398).

Due to the inherent nature of education and cultural values, Hofstede's (1980) theoretical framework can be used to better comprehend how social values shape schools' content and practices. Hofstede's analytical framework is composed of four dimensions: power distance, uncertainly avoidance, locus of control, and social principledness.

The first dimension, power distance, refers to the "degree to which citizens tolerate social inequalities" (Kubow & Fossum, 2003, p. 236). The second one, uncertainty avoidance, looks at the level of social uncertainty that a society bears. Although the locus of control examines how positive or negative reinforcement is set according to a society's values, social principledness is "associated with a strong inclination on a part of a culture to acquiesce, without a question, to authority, thereby accepting the conventional values and norms of that society" (Kubow & Fossum, 2003, p. 236).

Though all these dimensions are equally important and applicable when examining school systems through psycho-sociological lenses, only two will be used in this paper: Hofstede's locus of control and social principledness. Selecting these two dimensions allows for a broader analysis of how these values have been embedded throughout the development of the Japanese education system.

Early Days of Japanese Education System

Through the different periods of history, the Japanese educational system went through many changes. As it did, however, one goal was always kept constant: to promote Japanese culture and identity. One of the earliest transformations was the movement of the samurai class into other professions maintaining their ethical code of conduct – obedience, cooperation, loyalty and group conformity. They became the leadership group behind the first movements towards Japan's economic modernization. In addition, the inclusion of the samurai in many other occupations meant the ramification of their code of conduct throughout Japanese society. Moreover, schooling was designed based on the tenets of Confucian attitudes. These attitudes reinforced the "idea of handing down culture to succeeding generations and the ideal of the disciple following faithfully in the footstep of his scholarly seniors" (Shuichi & Toshio, 1995, p. 23). This Confucian perspective, still present today, influenced the education system tremendously in two ways. First, it not only promoted a high respect for quality learning, but it also encouraged "deference to authority per se that became an obstacle when it came to integrating personal creativity with the acquisition of knowledge" (Shuichi & Toshio, 1995, p. 24). Therefore, the value of social principledness is deeply rooted on the Confucian beliefs very significant in Japan.

The MEXT's Role

The Japanese educational system was born with *The Fundamental Code of Education* (Gutek, 1993, p. 161) in 1872, incorporating Western forms but safeguarding Japanese social patterns and cultural codes; it also protected the values of social principledness and locus of control. This code presented a highly centralized national system, and called for a universal education based on a pyramid system. This pyramid system included a compulsory primary education for children from ages 6-14. From the French system, the Japanese borrowed the

highly centralized administrative model. The top-level administrative decision makers were located at the national Ministry of Education. Under the Ministry of Education, Regional School Inspection Bureaus were established in charge of monitoring the local school district supervisors (Gutek, 1993, p. 161).

Today the Japanese educational system remains highly centralized, governed by the MEXT's Monbusho. The Monbusho is responsible for developing national policies, providing resources for education, and enforcing a national curriculum and standards throughout the system. The Japanese educational system, thus, presents a vertical organizational structure, where the MEXT (on the top of the pyramid) develops policies to be implemented at the local level (Gutek, 1993, p. 165).

In terms of the national curriculum, the MEXT is in charge of preparing the course of study. The highly arranged curriculum defines the scope and sequence for each level of schooling setting the stage for a uniform national educational outcome. Kazuo (2001) elaborates, stating that though schools have the power to develop their unique curriculum, most of the compulsory-level schools choose to design similar plans of study. As a result, Japanese schools are often criticized for being too homogeneous (Kazuo, 2001, p. 23). This uniformity also translates to textbooks selected and approved by the MEXT for each area of study, creating a list from which the schools will pick their books. According to Gutek (1993), textbooks are very standardized and present the specific content to be covered in a particular subject. In addition, because instruction is done following the textbooks' format, teachers find themselves following a strict sequence that leaves little to no room for deviation (Gutek, 1993, p. 168). This uniformity in national curriculum is another example of how social principledness values shape the Japanese educational system.

At the elementary level, the national curriculum established by the Monbusho accentuates the learning of the Japanese language arts and literature, social studies, and math and sciences, among others. In addition, because of the large class size and emphasis on group behavior, assignments are developed towards the group and it is instilled in the students that the completion of the task is the responsibility of the group. The group, therefore known as the *han* (group of four or more students), fosters a family-type oriented relationship among the han members as they work together in the fulfillment of their school's task for the day.

At the same time, elementary teachers, aside from promoting intellectual development, are also concerned with the emotional well-being and development of each child. This holistic experience contributes to the socialization of students through the "development of interpersonal competencies and promoting a sense of social cohesion and collective responsibility among students" (Kubow & Fossum, 2003, p. 198). Decision-making within the group as Roland (1989) denotes is a process under which the group little by little arrives to concurrence guided by its leader (p. 74). This process thus introduces to the students the decision-making process accepted and encouraged in the Japanese culture.

At the secondary level, the Japanese educational system presents a rigorous examination structure. Though the Japanese system does promote group conformity, much of the economic success a Japanese person can attain is closely related to the type of school that person attends, or the locus of control. Hence, most of the secondary level education is targeted to the preparation and passing of the school's examinations. To be promoted to the upper secondary level (non-compulsory), students must pass first the examination that will allow them to attend a prestigious upper secondary school (Gutek, 1993, p. 173).

Once again, the need to conform to the group and not to disappoint the members of the family creates a motivation--and sometimes stress for the Japanese students--to pass the exams and become an active professional member of Japanese society. As Roland (1989) explains, "high achievement motivation factors are …motives around family and group obligation and family continuity, as well as the internationalization of strong maternal expectations for achievement" (p. 97). This emphasis on group obligation and family continuity is another example of the locus of control dimension.

The Role of School

For modern Japan, consequently, education is a national priority. Schooling in Japan grows out of and has remained "synchronized with the national values of social cohesiveness and harmony. This has produced clearly established authoritative beliefs and values that define the patterns of behavior and expectations" (Gutek, 1993, p. 166). Hence, Japanese society has a clear understanding of the role of school--social principledness. For them, schools are academic institutions responsible for transmitting subjects needed for economic development through group work, thus reinforcing the value of group behavior, or behaviors oriented towards sensitivity to group feelings. In addition, it creates a societal agreement, particularly between parents and schools, of what conforms to or violates the acceptable behavior building upon the home and family, which in turn mirror those of the larger society.

This implicit societal agreement, hence, leads to the education of children embracing since early age the Japanese core values of cooperation and group conformity. According to Kazuo (2001), society is understood as practical systems and interactions taking place within society. Because these systems and interactions are accepted by the Japanese society as given and self-evident, there is no need to question them. Moreover, the maintenance of the status quo within organizations and systems is associated with safeguarding the stability of society (Kazuo, 2001, p. 1).

Japanese identity, furthermore, has been crafted to maintain the core cultural values intact (social principledness and locus of control). As Roland (1989) states:

> The Japanese society is oriented around specific group or units---household, corporation, bureaucracy, business, educational or social institution, or village. As a result, the Japanese have very clear-cut boundaries, well-defined pyramidal vertical hierarchy, and usually become deeply emotionally involved and loyal to one group only. (p. 72)

These deep emotional connections, hence, lead to a strong commitment to the purposes of the group. For example, mothers--called education mothers, *Kypiku mama*--are supposed to be the head of the household, and to be very active and influential in their children's education; for a student, it could be a class or school, and for men, the professional work group (Roland, 1989, p. 72).

Conclusion

The Japanese education system has been designed to promote and protect Japan's core cultural values of obedience, cooperation, loyalty and group conformity. At the same time, Japan, as a key player in the international field, must ensure that Japanese citizens are equipped with skills--such as open-mindedness, free enterprise, and inventiveness--all very important for Japan's continuous economic level. But above all, individualism is needed to think locally and act globally. How Japan moves toward embracing these two realities into the Japanese education system remains to be seen.

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