Class Size and Student/Teacher Ratios in the Japanese Preschool

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If there is a universal truth, a universal good, as far as American preschool teachers, parents, and scholars are concerned, it is, The smaller the class size and the smaller the student/teacher ratio, the better. Advisory groups in the United States push state regulatory agencies to lower student/teacher ratios for 4-year-olds, from 18:1 to 14:1. American parents shopping for a program for their 3-year-olds are likely to begin their questioning of a preschool director by asking, How many children do you have in each class? If they can afford it, these parents are likely to select a school with a ratio of eight children per teacher over a school with a ratio of 12:1. American early childhood education specialists stress the importance of small classes, small student/teacher ratios, and a high degree of contact between students and their teachers.[1] This clear American preference for small classes can be seen, for example, in Belsky's recent review of day-care research: "When group size is large and ratios are *poor*, individual attention to children falls victim to the exigencies of coping with an over-extended set of resources. Either restrictions and controlling behavior increase, or disregard and aimless behavior on the part of the child increases. Neither is in the child's best interest" (emphasis added).[2]

What, then, are we to make of the Japanese preschool's typical ratios of 30 students per teacher and per class for 4- and 5-year-olds? Japan is a wealthy country, a country that gives great importance to education, a country whose students from first grade on outperform Americans (and, indeed, most of the rest of the world) on international academic achievement tests.[3] Yet, Japanese schools function with class sizes and student/teacher ratios that far exceed American prescribed limits on students per teacher and that are wildly out of line with what most American experts on preschool education believe to be ideal. Mombusho, the Japanese Ministry

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[1] R. Ruopp and J. Travers, "Janus Faces Day Care: Perspectives on Quality and Cost," in *Day Care: Scientific and Social Policy Issues*, ed. E. Zigler and E. Gordon (Boston: Auburn, 1982).

[2] J. Belsky, "Two Waves of Day Care Research: Developmental Effects and Conditions of Quality," in *The Child and the Day Care Setting* (New York: Praeger, 1984), p. 27.

[3] T. Husén, *International Study of Achievement in Math: A Comparison of Twelve Countries* (New York: Wiley, 1967); H. Stevenson, J. Stigler, and S. Lee, "Achievement in Mathematics," in *Child Development and Education in Japan* (New York: Freeman, 1986), pp. 201–16.

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of Education, has set a limit of 40 children per class for *yochien,* which are comparable to U.S. nursery schools for 3- and 4-year-olds and to U.S. kindergartens for 5-year-olds. Koseisho, the Japanese Ministry of Health and Welfare, prescribes upper ratios of 4:1 for infants, 8:1 for toddlers, and 30:1 for 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds in *hoikuen,* which are analogous to U.S. day-care centers for children 4 years old and younger and to U.S. kindergarten for 5-year-olds.

Recently, American studies of Japanese preschools have begun to examine the techniques of classroom management Japanese teachers employ to keep their classes of 30 or more children in line and learning. Lewis suggests that, at the preschool level, teachers manage large classes by delegating authority to *toban* (monitors) and by interacting with the class as a whole rather than with students individually, thereby minimizing competition among the children for the teacher's energy, time, and attention.[4] Taniuchi focuses on the orientation efforts that go on in Japanese preschools at the beginning of each school year and on the coercive and persuasive techniques Japanese teachers employ to transform home-reared mama's boys and girls into a tractable group.[5] Lewis's and Taniuchi's explanations are convincing, and, indeed, our own research generally confirms their observations. But while explaining *how,* a focus on teacher's management techniques leaves mostly unanswered why. Why do Japanese choose to operate their preschools with such large class sizes and such large student/teacher ratios?

Like Lewis and Taniuchi, we were able to learn something of the ways in which Japanese teachers manage large groups of small children by observing Japanese classrooms and interviewing Japanese teachers. But we came to understand the rationale behind the large group size and the low student/teacher ratios of the Japanese preschool only when we showed Japanese teachers, parents, and administrators films of American and Japanese preschools and asked them to explain and evaluate what they saw.

Method

Most research on preschools takes the form of scholars studying practitioners and of men studying women and children. Similarly, most cross-cultural research conforms to a pattern of Westerners studying non-Westerners, whites studying nonwhites, and, again, scholars studying

[4] Catherine Lewis, "Cooperation and Control in Japanese Nursery Schools," *Comparative Education Review* 28 (1984): 69–84.

[5] L. Taniuchi, "Inter-Relationships between Home and Early Formal Learning Situations for Japanese Children" (paper presented at the meeting of the Comparative and International Education Society, New York, November 26, 1984), and "Training Learning Skills and Concentration in Japanese Pre-School Children" (paper presented at the Symposium on Education and Socialization, Sixth East Coast Asian American Education Conference, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, N.J., June 21, 1985).

practitioners, and men studying women and children. Believing that to do scholarship is to wield a kind of power in the world, we have strived to devise a research method that would allow us, if not to reverse, at least to mitigate some of these traditional power inequities in scholarship. We have sought to devise a research strategy that would shift the power to define meaning away from the researchers and back to the preschool teachers, administrators, parents, and even children who have traditionally been subjects rather than partners of investigation.[6]

The key to our method is the use of videotapes. We began with a traditional ethnographic approach, observing a dozen preschools in Tokyo, Hiroshima, Osaka, and Kyoto (and in China and the United States as well, as the data reported in this paper on Japan are only part of a much larger study). We next chose two Japanese preschools on which to focus—one a *yochien* (nursery school), one a *hoikuen* (day-care center)—and filmed a typical day in a classroom of 4-year-olds in each school. We edited the more than 6 hours of videotape shot in each school down to approximately 30 min. We then took these edited tapes (which we call "visual ethnographies") back to Kyoto, to the schools where they were made and, using a portable videocassette recorder and television monitor, showed them in separate screenings to groups of parents, children, teachers, and administrators. As these audiences watched our tape of their school, we asked them, first, if these edited 30-min videotaped portraits succeeded in reflecting their schools as they saw them (and if not, how not). We asked the teachers who appeared in our tapes to explain the meaning of their actions. We asked administrators to explain their schools' philosophy for caring for and educating young children. Sometimes, when we showed our tapes to audiences of parents, children, teachers, and administrators, reactions and explanations emerged spontaneously. At other times, we had to stimulate discussion by asking questions. We taped these sessions of teachers, administrators, parents, and children watching, discussing, and explaining their actions and thus literally gave them a voice in our study, as their words eventually become the narration for our films and the ultimate source of authority in our papers.[7]

[6] For a discussion of power relations in cross-cultural research and a critical review of studies that have attempted in various ways to decenter from the author and reduce the anthropologist's privilege, see J. Clifford, "On Ethnographic Authority," *Representations* 1, no. 2 (1983): 118–46; and George Marcus and Michael Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

[7] The idea of using film in this way—and specifically for turning ethnographic subjects into authors by recording their reactions as they watch a film about themselves—came from Linda Conner and the compelling series of ethnographic films she made in Bali with Tim and Patsy Asch (see Linda Conner, Timothy Asch, and Patsy Asch, *Jero Tapakan: Balinese Healer* [Boston: Cambridge University Press, 1986]). It would be disingenuous for us to suggest that, simply by giving Japanese parents, teachers, and administrators the chance to explicate films made in their schools, we have thereby succeeded in avoiding imposing our personal and cultural meanings onto the Japanese preschool. While we strive with our method to empower our Japanese informants and to minimize

The next step in our method involved showing a tape we made and edited of a preschool in the United States to audiences of Japanese children, parents, and preschool staff members. Once again, we videotaped the discussions that followed the screenings of the tapes, and we also asked our informants to record their reactions on questionnaires.[8]

Rather than assume that Komatsudani Hoikuen and Senzan Yochien (the Japanese preschools where we taped) are representative, we showed our tapes of these two Kyoto preschools to audiences associated with preschools in Hiroshima, Osaka, Tokyo, and Chiba. We recorded the comments of 280 Japanese preschool parents, teachers, administrators, and education students telling us in what ways they found Komatsudani and Senzan to be familiar and unfamiliar, typical and unusual.

In this paper, we present Japanese preschool teachers' and administrators' explanations of the films we made in their schools and their reactions to the film we showed them of an American preschool. The view we get of Japanese preschools from these two kinds of data—Japanese insiders' views of their own schools (autoethnography) and Japanese outsiders' views of another culture's school (ethno-ethnography)—challenges us to rethink the issues of teacher/student ratio and class size.[9]

"Tell Me: Why Do You Have Such Large Classes?"

In 1985, when we returned to Kyoto to show children, parents, and staff of Komatsudani Hoikuen and Senzan Yochien edited versions of the tapes we made of their schools, and of American and Chinese preschools as well, we expected our Japanese informants to tell us why they preferred large classes with high student/teacher ratios to small classes with low

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our authority to proclaim meaning, our interpretive authority nevertheless necessarily pervaded each step of our study. This power and authority were nowhere more clear than in the filming and editing process. Though in each school we visited we asked teachers and administrators for their advice about what we should film, the choice of schools, subjects, camera angles, and so forth were, in the end, our own. We have attempted to deal with this source of distortion by asking children, teachers, parents, and administrators to criticize our edited product and point out to us where they believe our tapes are misleading or atypical. In the filming and editing, as in the study as a whole, our goal was not to deny or abrogate our authority so much as, at every step, to negotiate it.

[8] Questionnaires distributed to parents, teachers, administrators, and education students who watched our 20-min tapes of Chinese, Japanese, and American preschools used five-point Likert-scaled items to quantify responses to our tapes. Respondents were asked to make judgments about each culture's preschool on 20 items, including strength of the curriculum, children's activity level, materials, safety, warmth of teachers, and overall quality of the program.

[9] Generally, the term "emic analysis" is used to refer to an outsider (usually an anthropologist) explaining a foreign culture using insider's terms and concepts. We introduce the term "autoethnography" (after the term "autobiography") to refer to the more direct presentation of insider's theories about themselves and their institutions. As it happens, the Japanese have a robust tradition of autoethnography, a popular discourse they call *Nihon bunka ron* (Japanese theories about Japanese culture) and *Nihonjin ron* (Japanese theories about the origins and character of the Japanese people). In the tradition of ethnobotany, ethnopsychiatry, and ethnomedicine, we use the term "ethno-ethnology" to refer to people of one culture's beliefs about another culture's people, customs, and institutions. Thus, the study in this paper of Japanese parents', teachers', and administrators' thoughts about American preschools is an example of an ethno-ethnological approach.

student/teacher ratios. We were therefore puzzled and a bit worried by the first responses we received after showing teachers at Senzan a tape of an American preschool with a student/teacher ratio of 8:1. Saito-*sensei* (teacher) began the discussion with a sigh: "Gee, it must be great to teach in a school with such small classes." Tanaka-*sensei* said, "I envy the way the American teacher in the film plays with the children in such an uninhibited, 'barefoot' way." Seeing our hypothesis unraveling before our eyes, we desperately sought clarification: "You're saying you would like to have smaller classes in your school?" "Sure," the teachers all agreed, "it would be much easier to teach a smaller class." Before abandoning our hypothesis, we tried one last question: "We want to make sure we understand this. You're saying it would be better to have a class size of 10 students instead of 25 or 30?" Saito-*sensei,* looking a bit puzzled, responded: "No, we didn't say better. Well sure, better for the teacher, but it wouldn't be better for the children, would it? Maybe I'm wrong, but it seems to me that children need to have the experience of being in a large group in order to learn to relate to lots of kinds of children in lots of kinds of situations."

Tanaka-*sensei,* who had commented favorably (or at least her comments had seemed to us to have been favorable) about what she had called the "barefoot" play style of the American teacher in our tape, then explained:

> I envy the way the American teachers, with such small classes, have time to play so affectionately with each child. That's how I like to play with my nieces and nephews. That's a good way for aunts and uncles and parents to play with their children. But I don't think that's necessarily the best way for a teacher to relate to children. Teaching is different from being a parent or aunt or friend to a child. Sometimes I feel like playing very warmly in a down-on-the-floor, barefoot sort of way with my students, and sometimes I feel like hugging some of my students or having an intimate chat with one of the little girls. And sometimes I do these things, of course. I'm a human being, as well as a teacher, and I'm not suggesting that teachers should be cold or formal. What I am trying to say is that I believe a teacher should emphasize relating to the class as a whole, rather than to each student, even if this is a little sad for the teacher sometimes.

Comments like these from Japanese teachers viewing our tapes of American and Japanese preschools suggested to us that behind the differences between the United States and Japan in the average number of children per teacher and per class lie very different notions of the function of the preschool teacher and the role of preschools in educating and socializing young children.

Teaching and Mothering

Americans expect consistency between teachers' and parents' approaches to child care and between children's behavior at home and at school. For example, Barbara Culler, a day-care center director in Honolulu, told us:

> We feel it's crucial that children get the same sort of messages at home as at school. If we teach children here at school to use words instead of hitting to deal with disagreements, and then these children go home and get slugged by their parents, it undoes what we are trying to accomplish. When situations like this arise, we ask parents to come in to talk about our different approaches to discipline. If we can't resolve our differences, we occasionally have to counsel parents to change schools.

Belsky similarly emphasizes continuity between home and school, concluding that the same factors that make for good parenting make for good day-care.[10] Feeney and Chun point out that American preschool administrators tend to select teachers for their programs "who emphasize the maternal role."[11]

Our discussions with Japanese parents, teachers, and administrators suggest, in contrast, that, in Japan, the worlds of preschool and home, of teacher and mother, are viewed as largely discontinuous: little consistency in approach or behavior is expected across the two domains.[12] As Tanaka-*sensei* pointed out to us after watching our American preschool film, "barefoot," intimate, mother-like, one-to-one interaction is good for children and satisfying for adults and children alike, but it is not the role of teachers to provide this kind of play. Teachers are not parents, and, to the degree a Japanese teacher allows herself to slip into a mother-like stance toward a child in her care, Tanaka-*sensei* suggests, she has compromised her role as a teacher.

We can see in these different views of the teacher's role larger cultural differences between Japan and the United States. In the United States, where dyadic relations are emphasized over triadic (group) relations, any relationship between an adult female and a small child (as, for instance, between preschool teacher and student) cannot help but reflect in important ways the mother-child bond. Conversely, in Japan, where group relations are emphasized over dyadic bonds, a preschool teacher is less likely to play a mother-like role vis-à-vis the children in her care.

The typical career path of the Japanese preschool teacher works to provide a steady stream of non-mother-like employees. Most Japanese preschool teachers are hired directly out of college or junior college at 20 or 22 years old, and they generally work only 3–5 years before retiring to marry and start a family. As young, unmarried women in Japan, teachers' culturally proscribed role demeanor is very unlike the way married women

[10] Belsky (n. 2 above), pp. 26–27.

[11] S. Feeney and R. Chun, "Effective Teachers of Young Children," *Young Children* 41 (November 1985): 47–52.

[12] Though teachers of 3-, 4-, and 5-year-old children in *yochen* (nursery schools) try to be non-mother-like, the situation is quite different for *hoikuen* (day-care) teachers caring for infants. In the nursery section of the Japanese day-care center, teachers clearly play motherly roles toward the children in their care.

behave. Unmarried young women, including preschool teachers, are expected to be energetic, cheery, cute, and girlish. A Japanese preschool teacher is likely to appear to the children in her class to be more like a (much) older sister than a mother. It is precisely at that point in her career when she begins to tire of her girlish role and to desire a child of her own that a Japanese teacher is most likely to retire (permanently) from preschool teaching. The average age of the Japanese teachers in our study was 24, as compared to 29 in the United States and 34 in China.

High student/teacher ratios in Japanese preschools also function to keep teachers from being too mother-like in their interactions with students. Large class sizes and large student/teacher ratios are disliked by Americans because they make intense dyadic relations between teachers and students more difficult. Our interviews suggest that, in Japan, this loss of dyadic intensity, rather than being an undesirable by-product of large ratios, is an anticipated and intended effect. If the ratio were to fall below 20 or so students per teacher, the teacher would become increasingly accessible and her attention increasingly attainable by individual students. Not only would this threaten the group ethos that Japanese value highly and interfere with children's play with peers, but it also would make the teacher more mother-like and thereby encourage children to behave more like dependent sons and daughters, thus blurring the distinction Japanese feel is crucial between school and home, teacher and mother. Dr. Sakuma Toru, a clinical psychologist we spoke with at the Juso Community Center in Osaka, made this point very powerfully when we asked him to speculate on why he thought in the past few years therapists in Japan have begun to see more cases of school phobia as early as the preschool level:

> I would suggest one major factor coming into play might be the decreases in class size that have become so common in Japan in the past 10 years or so. As the student/teacher ratio drops from 40:1 to 25:1 and even to as low as 15 children per teacher, this can have a deleterious effect on some children. Japanese teaching theory and practice is based on working with large groups of children. This is what Japanese teachers are trained to do. This is what they do best. Most Japanese teachers are not prepared to teach children in smaller groups, with smaller ratios. I believe that a teacher who doesn't change her approach as the class size drops can have a harmful effect on some of her students. There is safety in numbers, you see. In a larger class, children can hide more easily. But, in a smaller class, the teacher's personality becomes more important, as does the quality of the teacher's relationship to each student. Perhaps a good teacher will do well with any size class. But if the teacher is only ordinary or mediocre, decreasing class size can have the paradoxical effect of causing more discomfort and anxiety in students struggling with emotional and developmental problems and thus produce more school phobia.

The child's transition from the dyadic world of home to the triadic world of school and society is facilitated not by offering teachers who are

mother substitutes but rather by offering a program of large class size and high student/teacher ratios, a program structured to limit face-to-face, emotionally intense interactions between children and teachers.

These points were also borne out in the reactions of Japanese parents and teachers who watched our tapes. Most Japanese mothers and teachers praised the creativity and warmth of the American teachers in our films, but many also wondered if in preschools in the United States there was not, perhaps, too little chance for children to enjoy spontaneous, unsupervised child-child interactions and too much emphasis on the child-teacher relationship. For example, a *yochien* mother in Tokyo said of the American film:

> The teacher is so stimulating and creative! The children look happy and bright. Everything looks so exciting. But, as I was watching, I found myself wondering if it might sometimes not get to be too much. I wonder what it is like for a child to be in a class where the teacher is always so fun and creative and exciting, and so important to the children. Wouldn't the children get to be too dependent on the teacher's always being there to organize their play and show them how to have fun?

Kumagai-*sensei,* the assistant principal of Senzan Yochien, explained:

> Teachers in our *yochien* have 30 children to watch at once, and that's not necessarily a bad thing because it forces children to learn to deal with problems and disagreements on their own. Children get spoiled these days at home. They are used to having their mothers' undivided attention. It's good for them to have the experience of interacting with other children without their mothers around.

Developmentally Appropriate Chaos

We have seen that many Japanese preschool parents and educators believe that it is vitally important for teachers to be unlike mothers and for school to be unlike home. A key distinction between the worlds of home and of school is the level of chaos. The home of a young Japanese child at times may be noisy and disheveled but never as chaotic as a *yochien* or a *hoikuen.* As Lewis writes: "In view of previous suggestions that the behavior of Japanese children in primary school is somewhat regimented, the noise and chaos level of the Japanese nursery school was perhaps the single most astonishing aspect of [my] observations."[13] This chaos is a result, to a great extent, of school size, class size, and student/teacher ratios. Americans believe that large class size and large student/teacher ratios create the potential for chaos, which in turn creates the necessity for teachers becoming (undesirably) authoritarian and rigid in their approach to children. For example, Clarke-Stewart and Gruber write: "With a larger group of children, aggressive behavior—chaos—in the day care

[13] For a description and explanation of Japanese preschool teachers' feelings about fighting and strategies for promoting cooperation, see Lewis (n. 4 above).

setting cannot be tolerated. Teachers may more actively discourage children from negative behavior with their playmates when there are more of them around."[14]

Though agreeing with Americans that large class size and large student/teacher ratios tend to lead to chaos, many of the Japanese we spoke with view chaos in preschools as normal and even desirable, an important transitional experience between the sheltered life of the homebound toddler and the tumult of the real world. Japanese teachers who believe that a healthy environment for young children includes periods of chaos can teach large groups of children without feeling compelled to become too authoritarian or rigid in an attempt to maintain tight control of the classroom. When we asked Higashino-*sensei*, the assistant principal of Komatsudani, "Doesn't the noise and chaos ever get to you?" she responded: "Aren't children in America wild and noisy? The purpose of preschool is to give children a place to be children. To be a child is to be wild and noisy. Children growing up in Japan these days too miss a chance to get to be real children. I think preschools should give them this chance."

Teaching Group Mindedness in a Changing Japan

In explaining their philosophies of preschool education, several of the Japanese teachers and administrators we spoke with agreed with Higashino that preschools have an increasingly important role to play in helping children grow up in a Japan they view as rapidly changing. Demographic and cultural changes in postwar Japan have led to profound changes in the Japanese family, and these changes are reflected in the way Japanese think about their preschools and, specifically, in how they think about class size and teacher/student ratios.

In the last 100 years, and particularly since the war, there has been a rapid urbanization and nuclearization of the Japanese family.[15] Numbers of children per family have dropped.[16] Young people have moved from the country to the city and from the city to the suburbs, leaving grandparents and other kin behind.[17] The "salariman" life-style of commuting white-collar husband and nonworking stay-at-home wife has become the ideal-typical family structure in contemporary Japan.[18] In the context of these

[14] A. Clarke-Stewart and C. Gruber, "Day Care Forms and Features," in *The Child and the Day Care Setting*, ed. R. Ainslie (New York: Praeger, 1984).

[15] T. Koyama, "Changing Family Structure in Japan," in *Japanese Culture: Its Development and Characteristics*, ed. R. Smith and R. Beardsley (Chicago: Aldine, 1962).

[16] T. Iritani, *The Value of Children: A Cross-national Study*, vol. 6, *Japan* (Honolulu: East-West Center, 1979).

[17] S. Linhart, "Changing Family Structure and Problems of Older People in Japan: Present Trends and Future Prospects," in *Social Structures and Economic Dynamics in Japan up to 1980*, vol. 1, ed. G. Fodella and M. Gianna (Milan: Luigi Bocconi University, 1975); I. Taeuber, *The Population of Japan* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1958).

[18] Ezra Vogel, *Japan's New Middle Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).

changes, Japanese preschools have grown and flourished, taking over the child-rearing and child-minding functions traditionally performed less by mothers than by the extended family and the community (by the *sekken*, the ever-watching, supportive, and critical community of concerned others).[19] Even the Japanese mothers who work full time that we spoke with viewed the role of preschools less as providing a substitute form of mothering than as offering something no mother can provide: a first experience of living out in the world.

Parents in contemporary Japan living in inner-city high-rises and in apartments in the newly created "bed towns" that ring the larger cities look to preschools to give their children the chance to enjoy the kind of spontaneous interactions with other children that they recall experiencing as children growing up in families of four and five children surrounded by a friendly sea of cousins, family friends, and neighbors. In this rapidly changing world, Japanese believe that it is in preschools, and, specifically, in preschools with large ratios and large classes, that children are most likely to get the chance to interact with other children and to learn *shakaisei* (social consciousness) and *shudan seikatsu* (group life).[20]

Several of the Japanese preschool administrators we spoke with suggested to us that large classes with high student/teacher ratios are traditionally Japanese and that small classes with low ratios are American. But the system of large classes currently in use throughout Japan actually reflects a relatively recent Japanese borrowing from the West. The contemporary Japanese school system, with large classes and high student/teacher ratios, was developed a little over 100 years ago in the early Meiji era; it was based on Western educational models of the time and revised, under American direction, in the occupation period. Japanese education before Western influence emphasized small classes, individual tutorials, hands-on training, and learning through apprenticeship.[21] The contemporary Japanese education system of large class size and large student/teacher ratios is traditionally Japanese less in the sense of being a legacy of the distant past than in the sense of promoting what Japanese believe to be important traditional values. In an era in which family size has shrunk and extended family and community networks of kin, neighbors, and friends are feared to be unraveling, large class size and large ratios have become increasingly important strategies for promoting the traditional

[19] M. White and R. LeVine, "What is an *Ii Ko?*" in *Child Development in Japan*, ed. H. Stevenson, H. Azuma, and K. Hakuta (New York: Freeman, 1986).

[20] For *shakaisei*, see I. Shigaki, "Child Care Practices in Japan and the United States: How Do They Reflect Cultural Values in Young Children?" *Young Children* 38 (1983): 13–24. For *shudan seikatsu*, see Taniuchi, "Inter-Relationships between Home and Early Formal Learning Situations for Japanese Children" (n. 5 above).

[21] Ronald Dore, *Education in Tokugawa Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965); Richard Rubinger, *Private Academies of Tokugawa Japan* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982).

TABLE 1
WHAT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT REASON FOR A SOCIETY TO HAVE PRESCHOOLS?

	Respondents by Country (%)		
	Japan	China	United States
To give children the chance to be a member of a group	61.4	12.3	19.0
To give children the chance to play with other children	13.9	8.0	14.0
To give children a good start academically	.3	37.3	20.5
To make young children more independent and self-reliant	13.6	10.6	21.0
To start children on the road toward being good citizens	5.4	11.4	3.5
To free parents for work and other pursuits	1.4	16.5	6.5
Other answers	5.0	3.9	15.5

NOTE.—Figures are based on a total sample size of 720 respondents.

Japanese values of groupism and selflessness and for combating what many Japanese believe to be the dangers of Western-style individualism.

Survey questions we included in the questionnaires we distributed following the screenings of our videotapes suggest that Japanese view the most important function of preschools as teaching and promoting groupism.[22] Sixty-one percent of the 280 Japanese preschool administrators, teachers, and parents who filled out our questionnaires chose "to learn to be a member of a group" as their first answer to the question, "What is the most important reason for a society to have preschools?" In contrast, the top American answer was "to make children more independent and self-reliant"; the top Chinese answer was "to give children a good start academically" (see table 1).

In the discussion that followed our screening in Tokyo of the tape of the American preschool with 10 children per class, one Japanese teacher commented, "A class that size seems kind of sad and underpopulated." Another teacher wondered, "In a class that size, wouldn't a child's world be too narrow?" After viewing a tape of a Chinese preschool class with 26 children and two teachers, only 15 percent of our Japanese respondents indicated on their questionnaires that they felt there were too many children per teacher in the class, as compared to 54 percent of our American respondents who viewed the same Chinese tape.

In a discussion that followed a screening of our Chinese, Japanese, and American tapes, Nagami Kengo, the director of a consortium of *yochien* and *hoikuen* in Hiroshima, suggested that large student/teacher ratios in Japan are necessary to promote groupism: "These days in Japan children are growing up in such small families that they don't have the chance to learn what it means to be a member of a group. It is our job

[22] In constructing our values questionnaires, we were influenced by the work of Irene Shigaki (see Shigaki).

as educators of young children to see that children get this experience before they go on to primary school, where they will be expected to know how to behave properly and to be comfortable in large classes."[23] Okubo Chie, an Osaka *hoikuen* administrator explained:

> The task of the preschool is to produce *ningen-rashii kodomo* [human-like children].[24] To be fully human is to be not just an individual but also a member of a group. From what I've seen of American schools I would have to say they do a wonderful job of making children creative and self-reliant and individualistic. But as important as those characteristics are, we believe it is also important that children learn how to live as a member of a group. That's the real trick. To find the right balance between individualism and groupism, isn't it? I guess, seeing your films, my personal, honest reaction is that I would have to say we may go too far in the direction of stressing groupism in our preschools. But you see, this is not just a problem of the preschools; it is a problem of our whole society because groupism is stressed not only in our preschools but also in our primary schools and junior highs, and high schools, and universities, and in business and so forth. I guess it comes down to a basic difference between Japanese and foreigners. We Japanese are a group-oriented people, so it is only natural that our preschools be group oriented. I would guess that most things foreigners might find strange about our schools are related in some way to our group orientation.

Large Classes and Benign Neglect

On the day we taped at Komatsudani Hoikuen, the noisiest and most chaos producing of the 30 children in the Peach Class was 4-year-old Hiroki. Hiroki was at his wildest in a scene we taped as lunch drew to a close:

> About two-thirds of the children in the class are sitting at their low tables, eating and chatting. Other children are running around in the hallways or playing on the balcony that adjoins the classroom. Midori runs over to Fukui-*sensei,* who is sitting with some children at one of the tables, and announces that Hiroki is throwing flashcards off the balcony. Fukui-*sensei* says matter of factly to Midori, "Hiroki's throwing cards, is he? What do you suppose can be done about that?" Meanwhile, on the balcony, Hiroki punches Satoshi. Satoshi holds his wounded arm out in front of Hiroki and says, "Look what you did." Hiroki, with a trace of a smile, stomps on Satoshi's hand, sending Satoshi off in a gale of tears. Midori, returning from telling on Hiroki, sees Satoshi crying and taking him by the arm, leads him to a quiet corner. She comforts Satoshi, asks him to tell her what happened, and then says, "What a shame. That always happens when you play with Hiroki, doesn't it? Maybe you should play with someone else next time."

[23] In the United States, the shift from preschool to primary school requires the child to adjust from a class size of 12 or so to a class of around 25 children. In Japan, the comparable shift is from a preschool class of around 30 children to a first-grade class about one-third larger. In both Japan and the United States, most children by age 5 or 6 end up in large classes. The main difference is one of timing, with Japanese children making the transition from home rearing to big class in one leap at age 3 and American children making two smaller leaps, to a small- or medium-sized class at age 3 or 4 and then to a large class at age 5.

[24] Shigaki; White and LeVine.

When we returned to Komatsudani 2 months later with an edited version of the tape, we wondered if Fukui and her supervisors, Higashino and Yoshisawa, would be surprised or disturbed by the fight scene. Would Fukui be embarrassed to be seen in our tape seeming not to do anything about Hiroki's behavior? Would they use Komatsudani's large class size and high student/teacher ratios to excuse the chaos we captured in our visual ethnography of their school?

As we watched the fight scene with Fukui, Higashino, and Yoshizawa, we asked them if this looked like a typical day. Fukui responded: "Your being here with the camera made the children excited and I was a bit camera shy, but I'd have to say the way things look on the tape is pretty typical. Hiroki always acts like that. The fight is certainly typical Hiroki, and the tape pretty well shows the approach I usually take to dealing with him." Higashino added: "As you see in Fukui-*sensei*'s treatment of Hiroki, we try never to confront or criticize children directly. Hiroki is a very difficult child. What we think works best with him is to be as patient as we can be. We try to ignore his behavior with the hope that gradually he'll begin to notice the effect he is having on other children and his interactions with others will help him come around." When asked if the large class size makes it difficult for teachers like Fukui-*sensei* to break up or head off fights between children, Principal Yoshizawa said:

> It is no doubt true that if we had smaller classes, like in the United States, our teachers would be able to break up many of those kinds of fights more easily. But would that be a good thing? Perhaps one reason we have big classes is precisely to assure that there will be fights of this kind. Does that sound strange? At home these days children are supervised very closely by their mothers. Many have no siblings. They live in small apartments, living for the most part in a world of only mother and child. They have little opportunity to play naturally with other children, in a childlike way, out of the sight of adults. That's why I say that children's fighting isn't a real problem. If there were no fights, now that would be a problem. We don't encourage children to fight, but if fights occur, well, that may be for the best, and the best thing we can do might be not to rush in to break them up.[25]

When ratios and class size are small (as in the United States), preschool teachers can take a much more active approach to helping children arbitrate their disputes. In a small class, a teacher can work with children individually or in groups of two or three on developing the ability to share, to empathize, and to verbalize needs and feelings. But Japanese preschool teachers and administrators generally are ambivalent about this sort of high-profile approach. While they value the teaching of empathy (*omoiyari*) and the emphasis on feelings they saw in our tape of an American preschool,

[25] For a discussion of Japanese preschool teachers' feelings about fighting and strategies for promoting cooperation, see Lewis (n. 4 above).

many of the Japanese we interviewed suggested that such a direct, interventionist approach is too didactic and emotionally intense for young children, or at least for young Japanese children. In our tape of an American preschool, there is a scene in which a fight breaks out between two children over a toy. Before matters can escalate further, their teacher quickly comes over and begins a discussion: "What's going on here, boys? Jimmy, can you use words to tell Danny how you felt when he grabbed the truck out of your hands? Danny, can you tell Jimmy how you are feeling right now? Are you feeling angry? Sad?" When we stopped the tape at this point and asked the staff of Senzan Yochien in Kyoto for their reactions to this scene, Tanaka-*sensei* was first to respond:

> *Tanaka.* Wow, that's amazing. In America, even young children are encouraged to talk directly about their feelings.
>
> *Tobin.* Do you approve of this approach?
>
> *Tanaka.* For Americans maybe, but to me it's a little too heavy for children. It reminds me of marriage counseling.

Implications for the United States

What lessons are there here for Americans? Japanese perspectives on class size and student/teacher ratios have implications that go beyond the Japanese preschool: they have implications for American preschool pedagogy, implications for ethnically and culturally appropriate approaches to preschool teaching in a multicultural country such as the United States, and implications for cross-cultural preschool research.

Japanese perspectives on preschool education can lead us to ask if there are not, in addition to the obvious benefits, some hidden costs to the American system of preschools of small class size and small student/teacher ratios. As Lewis has suggested, these costs may include an overreliance on the teacher as disciplinarian and keeper of the peace with the undesirable side effect of preventing children from coming on their own to an understanding and acceptance of the need for self-control and internalized rules of conduct.[26] A related cost of small student/teacher ratios is that contact with the teacher may become more attractive to children than playing with or paying attention to their peers, thereby undermining children exploring as fully as they otherwise might ways of relating to their age-mates.[27]

Our discussions with parents and teachers in Japan and, more specifically, the comments of Dr. Sakuma suggest that, in preschools (and perhaps at other levels of education as well), there may be a danger zone

[26] Ibid.

[27] T. Field, "Preschool Play: Effects of Teacher/Child Ratios and Organization of Classroom Space," *Child Study Journal* 10, no. 3 (1983): 191–205; J. Reuter and G. Yunik, "Social Interaction in Nursery Schools," *Developmental Psychology* 9, no. 3 (1973): 319–25.

of ratios and class size from approximately 12 to approximately 20 children per teacher and per class. Inside this danger zone, children may tend to become frustrated and confused as they try to compete for their teacher's attention and approval, just as they would in a smaller class. A teacher with a "danger zone" class of 15 or 16 students may be tempted to relate to the children on a one-to-one, interpersonally intense basis but will find herself thwarted in her attempts by the sheer numbers of students in her care. In classes of this size, a student may be tempted to approach the teacher for some individual attention only to be interrupted by one of the other equally needy and now perhaps jealous students. In a class of 12 to 20 children, the illusion that the teacher is available and in control may tend to preclude children becoming a real group and discourage children from taking on roles of leadership and responsibility in the classroom. In classes with ratios greater than 20:1, teachers and students are more likely intuitively to realize that mutually satisfying dyadic interactions between teacher and student are unlikely. In these larger classes, children may tend to have more realistic expectations and to adjust their modes of interaction accordingly.

Our research in Japan suggests that large student/teacher ratios seem to function effectively when preschools employ methods of instruction and teacher-student interaction specifically suited to a large-group format. Most of us in the United States believe large class size and high student/teacher ratios to be, for various reasons, undesirable. But where high ratios are unavoidable, instead of attempting to use a small-class model of instruction with a large class, we might benefit by rethinking our pedagogical strategies more along Japanese lines of thought. When class size grows too large, rather than employing a watered-down, second-rate version of the American, individual-oriented, small-group teaching style, we might do well to look to Japanese large-group preschool teaching techniques, including (1) delegating authority to children, (2) intervening less quickly in children's fights and arguments, (3) having lower expectations for children's noise level and comportment, (4) using more musical cues and less verbal ones, (5) organizing more highly structured, large-group daily activities such as *taiso* (morning group exercise), (6) using a method of choral recitation for answering teacher's questions rather than calling on individuals, and (7) making more use of peer-group approval and opprobrium and less of the teacher's positive and negative reactions to influence children's behavior. Tanaka-*sensei*'s comments about "barefoot" play suggest that working with large groups of young children may require teachers to give up some of the one-to-one relating to children that we find so natural and enjoyable as friends, aunts and uncles, and parents.

Japanese perspectives on preschool class size and student/teacher ratios also hold implications for ethnically and culturally appropriate preschool

education in the United States. One question raised by our research is whether the American small-group, low-ratio preschool education model is not better suited to the strengths and needs of some children than of others. The American preschool model, in emphasizing the importance of children verbally expressing individual feelings, staking claim to individual possessions, respecting individual rights, taking pride in individual accomplishments, and talking out interpersonal disputes, may be promoting a personality style more consistent with the values of white middle-class America than with the cultural traditions of black, Hispanic, Asian, or Native Americans.[28]

Our work in Japan also has implications for future cross-cultural research on preschools. Our research suggests that, in Japan, class size and teacher/student ratios are viewed neither as an important source of program quality nor as a necessary condition for optimal child development. But, in this paper, we have looked primarily only at Japanese attitudes and beliefs about class size and student/teacher ratios—we have offered no data that speak to behavioral or cognitive effects of the Japanese approach. There is a need in the future for cross-cultural studies of preschools that explore the relation between class size, student/teacher ratio, and the development of emotion and cognition. Our work suggests that it will be crucial in these studies that measures of children's social, emotional, and cognitive competence include not only the American (Western) ideals of creativity, autonomy, self-confidence, and self-expression but also such Japanese values as group orientation, openness, perseverance, and empathy.[29] More specifically, our work suggests that, in future research on preschool class size and student/teacher ratios, the concepts of large and small need to be rethought from a less culture-bound perspective: preschool classes of 15 or 20, which are considered large in the West, would be considered small in Japan and other parts of Asia.

Conclusion

Our interviews with Japanese parents, teachers, and administrators following screenings of videotapes of typical days in Japanese and American preschools show that Japanese preschools are not just overpopulated versions of preschools in the United States. Instead, Japanese preschool ratios and class size, when explained by the Japanese, can be seen to reflect larger Japanese social and cultural values. Our research suggests

[28] For a discussion of class and ethnic differences in day care, see Vivian Suransky, *The Erosion of Childhood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

[29] For openness, see R. LeVine and M. White, *Human Conditions* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986). For empathy, see Shigaki.

that Japanese believe that their preschools, with their large class sizes and high student/teacher ratios, offer the spoiled and overly individualistic mama's boys and girls of today's increasingly middle-class, urban, nuclear-family-oriented Japan the chance to experience the pleasures and responsibilities of life in a group and thus to become, in Japanese terms, fully human.

[Footnotes]

[4] **Cooperation and Control in Japanese Nursery Schools**
Catherine C. Lewis
Comparative Education Review, Vol. 28, No. 1. (Feb., 1984), pp. 69-84.
Stable URL:
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0010-4086%28198402%2928%3A1%3C69%3ACACIJN%3E2.0.CO%3B2-X

[6] **On Ethnographic Authority**
James Clifford
Representations, No. 2. (Spring, 1983), pp. 118-146.
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