

Issues and Expectations in Japan About Moral or Values Education

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Abstract

This article tackles values education, which has a diverse range of meanings, depending on one's country, region, and person. In this article, however, it is used as a generic term that covers moral, religious, political, citizenship, character, and other kinds of education. In Japan, the law requires neutrality with regard to religion and political affiliation so values education is more often taken to mean moral education.

Introduction

Today, we live in a global society that requires us to respect a diverse range of value systems and coexist with different cultural groups. This necessitates major changes in the world of education, particularly moral education.

Compared with other countries, however, Japan has not seen any major change in the way moral education is taught. The Japanese government and MEXT, of course, have strong ambitions for reform. In fact, moral education reforms were made to the course of study for the first time in about 10 years last year. The most significant change has been the transformation of moral time, a learning area, into the subject morality. Despite this, however, almost no progress has been made in terms of classroom practice.

This article will identify problems in Japan, along with a future outlook that puts forth best approaches to values education not just in the country, but also in other Asian countries.

Changes to Moral Education in Japan

The modern school system in Japan was established by law in September 1872. Two months before that, the then-Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture established a normal school for teacher education as the country's first public school. That normal school is the forerunner of the University of Tsukuba. The school adopted European and American instructional methods and disseminated these throughout Japan.

Around 1879, however, apprehensions about the Westernisation of education in Japan arose, along with hopes of giving the Emperor a central role in the system. The movement asserted Chinese Confucianism. Before long, the movement gained power and in 1890 the "Imperial Rescript on Education" was announced as the Emperor's declaration regarding education:

“ Know ye, our subjects; our Imperial Ancestors have founded Our Empire on a basis broad and everlasting and have deeply and firmly implanted virtue; our subjects ever united in loyalty and filial piety have from generation to generation illustrated the beauty thereof. This is the glory of the fundamental character of Our Empire, and herein also lies the source of our education. Ye, our subjects, to be filial to your parents, affectionate to your brothers and sisters; as husbands and wives be harmonious, as friends true; bear yourselves in modesty and moderation; extend your benevolence to all; pursue learning and cultivate arts, and thereby develop intellectual faculties and perfect moral powers; furthermore advance public good and promote common interests; always respect the Constitution and observe the law; should emergency arise offer yourselves courageously to the State; and thus guard and maintain the prosperity of Our Imperial Throne coeval with heaven and earth. So shall ye not only be our good and faithful subjects, but render illustrious the best traditions of your forefathers.

The Way here set forth is indeed the teaching bequeathed by Our Imperial Ancestors, to be observed alike by their descendants and the subjects, infallible for all ages and true in all places. It is our wish to lay it to heart in all reverence, in common with you, our subjects, that we may all thus attain to the same virtue.

The 30th day of the 10th month of the 23rd year of Meiji, (Imperial Sign Manual, Imperial Seal) ”

Note: Then-Minister of Education Nobuaki Makino asked Dairoku Kikuchi and others to prepare this English translation in 1906.

In the declaration, the ideal state of the citizenry or their values as human beings are clearly indicated based on a view of the state centered on the Emperor. This way of thinking was taken as guide for school education and gave the direction for moral education. Until the end of World War II, that direction was not just a matter of theory, but carried out in actual practice in schools. Government-designated textbooks on moral education were prepared in accordance with this policy and the moral values that needed to be imparted were taught through the characters in featured stories (i.e., values-oriented moral education). The moral values or virtues that were given special emphasis included loyalty, filial piety, friendship, mercy, devotion, reverence, courage, and modesty. At worst, this led to militaristic thinking. For example, the death of the soldier Kohei Kikuchi in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895 was described in a government-designated textbook for first-grade students published in 1918 as: “Kohei Kikuchi was struck by an enemy bullet, but even in death the bugle never left his lips.”

After Japan's defeat in World War II in 1945, American-style education oriented towards learning from life experiences had a strong impact. Moral education was provided through educational activities in school, primarily social studies classes. The government began to think more strongly that moral education based on such methods was inadequate. As such, in 1958, although the basic policy for providing instruction throughout the entire curriculum did not change, giving students moral time once a week in place of social studies in elementary and middle schools was introduced. At that time, moral time was a learning or schedule area and not a subject. Students learned about moral values such as honesty, friendship, moderation, kindness, gratitude, fairness, and diligence (values-oriented moral education) at this time.

Although the wording of the objectives of moral education has been revised and moral time has been turned into the subject morality, the approach to moral education has not changed for more than 50 years now. Various techniques were devised as instructional methods. In particular, American-style methods to teach moral education and psychology were incorporated into the subject. Techniques such as value clarification and moral discussion were used. Teachers no longer inculcated values in students but instead emphasised “self-determination” in an effort to be values-neutral. This method, however, had the disadvantage of falling into value relativism. The teachers no longer taught important values. And so additional instructional materials were written, which were strongly influenced by the psychological approach of turning moral problems into problems of individual psychology.

The most notable material was “Notebook of the Heart,” a teaching aid for moral education for third- and fourth-grade students issued in 2002 by MEXT (psychology-oriented moral education). This teaching aid did not inculcate values in a top-down fashion; it was very crude. It had, for instance, a topic titled “Let's treat mistakes as valuable things.” This was accompanied by a picture of a boy who destroyed an older man's flowerpot with a soccer ball and words such as “Mistakes can be valuable things for improving oneself in the future.” It turned a problem that anyone can experience in daily life into a personal issue. It taught students to treat mistakes as valuable things but did not advise them to apologise, which could cause extreme distortions in their morality. If we break someone else's property, should we really prioritise thinking of the event as a valuable lesson? If that was the case, would we not make it a habit to commit mistakes so we learn more? Does this not cause people to be extremely egotistic?

The responses to the questions become clearer when the text was compared with the content of a prewar government-issued textbook for first-year students published in 1918, which taught students not to hide their mistakes. In one story, a boy apologised for damaging a shoji screen (paper sliding screen) on his neighbour's house while playing with a ball. It taught students to apologise for mistakes unlike in a similar story in "Notebook of the Heart." Too much emphasis on psychology-oriented morality then may not be the proper way to go. "Notebook of the Heart" was later revised and republished as "Our Morality." This new book added reading materials to the previous book.

A few years ago, a call within the government for a qualitative change in moral education was made to solve bullying problems amongst children. MEXT then reviewed how moral education was taught. In March 2017, a general revision to the course of study was made. Moral time was turned into the subject morality, which was not only values-oriented, but also psychology-oriented.

The Current State of Moral Education in Japan

Beginning April 2018, MEXT-certified textbooks were used in morality classes in elementary schools. The same will be used in middle schools starting April 2019. Handling morality classes integrating evaluation with instruction became an important issue. And so MEXT formed an expert council to determine how best to evaluate student performance in moral education. The council's report was issued in July 2016. The report included a concise and easy-to-understand description of current problems and future issues in moral education.

The report proposed to achieve qualitative changes in morality by removing biases towards simple discussions of the feelings of the characters in featured reading materials. Instead, teachers need to use a diverse range of instructional methods such as learning based on problem solving to tackle issues. They need to take a basic approach towards evaluation such as using the plan, do, check, and act (PDCA) cycle:

- Teachers need to provide written evaluations and not just grade students' work.
- Evaluation must be based on a broad range of categories.
- Teachers must perform intra-individual evaluations that encourage students.
- Evaluation must emphasise student development with regard to maintaining multi-faceted and multi-perspective viewpoints. Students must deepen their understanding of moral values in relation to their own selves.
- Teachers must observe and address specific learning needs of individual students over time.

The report also called for observation over a long period of time, for example, one year. It called for inspection of essays on thoughts and impressions formed over the course of a year. Students should be encouraged to apply their learnings in their daily lives. Teachers should evaluate students based on growth.

On-the-spot instruction should avoid understanding how story characters felt but should focus on self-involvement (putting themselves in the given situation). The report also discouraged discussions of simple life experiences. Teachers should instead incorporate experiential and problem-solving techniques in morality classes. Moral education should be founded on values-oriented moral education. Improving evaluation methods should be treated as an opportunity to promote diverse instructional methods through instruction integration.

Conclusion

Recent reforms in moral education in Japan did not start from the academe or the front lines of education, but rather from government leaders. Making morality a school subject was a result for public clamour to respond to bullying. As such, on 16 February 2013, the Education Rebuilding Implementation Council under the supervision of Prime Minister Abe, mandated schools to teach morality. The subject, however, lacked academic research support. It was nothing more than a replacement to the learning area, moral time. The classes still used similar textbooks such as "Notebook of the Heart." Instruction continued to focus on exploring the psychology of the main story characters. Students were still not asked to put themselves in the characters' shoes and engage in moral discussions and problem-solving activities. The country is thus still a long way off from the qualitative change that MEXT seeks. To make a radical change, moral education in Japan needs to improve.

Educational leaders need to shake themselves free from adhering to conventional values (rely on unquestionable beliefs they have been taught) and psychology-oriented learning (instead of solving problems in real life, they are satisfied to resolve issues as individuals).

Major results are unlikely to be achieved if we solely focus on reforming instructional methods related to moral behaviour. We can not only rely on experiential, problem-solving, and discussion-based learning, we need to do more. We should not only focus on what matter at present and improving content. We should integrate instruction and evaluation. We should keep in mind that in today's globalised society, we must know what morals are also taught in other countries and regions.

Unfortunately, Japan has been focusing more on improving instruction rather than actual content. Times have change and so should the content taught. Over the years, the list of values has just expanded to include autonomy, good faith, moderation, growth in individuality, courage, pursuit of truth, kindness, gratitude, courtesy, friendship, tolerance, respect for rules, fairness, diligence, familial love, group life, respect for tradition and culture, international understanding, respect for life, protecting nature, reverence, and joy in living. More than 80 concepts are taught from the first grade to middle school. Teachers cannot possibly remember them all. And moral education specialists involved in creating course outlines do not even attempt to prioritise what students should be taught more.

The “Imperial Rescript on Education” advocates 12 morals—be filial to your parents, help your siblings, be harmonious as husbands and wives, and so on. Not all people will be able to remember them. Even ancient Greece only advocated four virtues—courage, prudence, temperance, and justice. These are the same virtues taught in the medieval West, along with three additions—faith, charity, and hope. Buddhism teaches eight virtues in the “Noble Eightfold Path”—right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Islam has “five pillars”—faith, prayer, charity, fasting, and pilgrimage to Mecca.

Japan should consider the moral values taught in the global society as well. Students need to learn to respect diverse value systems and coexist with members of different cultural groups while valuing their own culture and traditions. The U.S. emphasises justice, human rights, and freedom. Perhaps, Japan should come up with a shorter list as well. An example would be respect for *wa* (harmony), abiding by the providence of nature, and feeling gratitude towards humanity and all things (captured in the word “*arigato*” or “thank you”). The Japanese people should pool their great wisdom and produce a list of at most 10 virtues that they consider particularly important. Doing that first is the most pressing issue for moral education. If fundamentally important content can be identified and appropriately taught in accordance with children’s growth, perhaps moral education will show rapid progress. The current exclusive focus on improving instruction needs a fundamental change.

In addition, Japan can work with the ASEAN to come up with moral values and content that would suit all countries in an effort to create shared or common values that transcend differences in culture, history, and religion. This could lead to the creation of an “ASEAN Values Education Charter” that can be implemented in schools, which can in turn lead to a peaceful society of symbiosis and coexistence. Unlike other regions, ASEAN has a diverse mix of religions and cultures. That is why the creation of a single set of universal values is important if Southeast Asia aims to be a conflict-free society. This hope can be achieved with improvements to values education.

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