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Volume 37  
Issue 2 Spring 2008

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Jeannine R. Studer  
University of Tennessee, Knoxville, [ietraceutk@utk.edu](mailto:ietraceutk@utk.edu)

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### Recommended Citation

Studer, Jeannine R. (2008). The School Counselor as an Emerging Professional in the Japanese Educational System. *International Education*, Vol. 37 Issue (2).

Retrieved from: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/internationaleducation/vol37/iss2/5>

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# THE SCHOOL COUNSELOR AS AN EMERGING PROFESSIONAL IN THE JAPANESE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

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**Jeannine R. Studer**

Professor, Counselor Education  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

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Political, social, and economic demands of society create conditions and issues to which leaders are compelled to respond. In some cases, new occupations that previously did not exist, appear as an answer to societal concerns. For example, the profession of school counseling in both Japan and the United States emerged in response to educational and societal needs.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Japan emerged from one of the worst recessions in the history of the country. The consequences of this economic crisis led to unemployment, bankruptcies, high suicide rates, and homelessness (Ishizaka, 1998; Japanese Education Today, n.d.; Japanese Statistics, 2002, as cited in Iwasaki, 2005). Because some Japanese held the belief that the educational system was to blame for the deterioration of the societal structure, the Japanese government responded by pushing the educational agenda to the forefront (NAJAS, n.d.) of the political agenda. Educational reform included reducing classroom hours in academic subjects while increasing courses in elective areas, and introducing moral education with an emphasis on problem-solving and creative thinking into the curriculum. Furthermore, school counselors began to emerge in Japanese schools (Iwasaki; S. Tatsumi, personal communication, July 12, 2006) to assist in reducing system inadequacies.

In contrast to the conditions that brought school counselors into Japanese schools, these professionals first entered schools in the United States in the early 1900s when the industrial revolution transformed America from a rural to an urban society. At this time, students from a lower socioeconomic background entered schools in greater numbers, and teachers who traditionally educated men for the professions of the clergy, medicine, or law, were now asked to work with students from diverse backgrounds and to provide vocational guidance for the expanding occupations.

The purpose of this article is to discuss the Japanese educational system and how the transformed society influenced the appearance of school coun-

selors in the educational setting. In addition, a comparison of issues that influenced the emergence of these professionals to those in the United States is provided. Finally, a discussion is included about whether the disputes and historical issues that impacted school counselors in the United States could serve as a guide for the newly arriving Japanese school counselors.

## **THE JAPANESE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM YESTERDAY AND TODAY**

Historically, Japanese education was reserved for the elite ruling class and samurai with the children of powerful families receiving an education based on military studies and Confucianism (*Cross-Cultural Comparison*, 1992). The first educational reform occurred in 1853 when Admiral Perry opened Japan after centuries of isolation. At this time there was an effort to mirror the educational system of the West, primarily the United States (*Cross-Cultural Comparison*), which included an emphasis on education for women and separation of religion from the educational structure. Students were subjected to a regimented policy to instill obedience and discipline, respect for elders, and responsibility for the next generation (Shah, 2001).

Prior to World War II, a holistic approach to child development was emphasized with less significance placed on studying other countries. Following World War II, the American values of democracy and equal educational opportunity influenced the Japanese educational system. This second reform revamped the structure to include six years of mandatory elementary school, three years of junior high, and three years of optional high school, with education mandatory through grade nine (*Cross-Cultural Comparison*, 1992; Ellington, 2001). Textbook and curricular revisions, co-education, and the elimination of moral education were included in this educational transformation (Ellington).

The culture and family in Japan have a huge impact on the success of the educational system. However, the Japanese, once avid supporters of their educational system, began to lose confidence in the traditional Japanese academic structure. Student motivation deteriorated, violence and school dropouts increased, and suicide and bullying behaviors became more prevalent (Japanese Education Today, n.d.; Kobayashi, 1999). Many Japanese believed that the rigidity of the educational system and the emphasis placed on examinations were responsible for student stress and frustration, and expressed through behaviors such as bullying and violence (Kobayashi). At this time, educational issues could no longer be ignored, and the third educational reform that began in the 1980s was given top

priority. The National Council on Educational Reform, established by the prime minister, proposed various changes including a focus on individual learning, revising the national examination, emphasizing affective education, and introducing school counselors (Choy; 1999; N. Fujji, personal communication, June 12, 1999) into middle schools with a mandate that school counselors be available in all public middle schools by the year 2006 (Hayes & Kemeguchi, 2001).

Credits required for a diploma were lowered from 80 to 74, and school days per week were decreased to five through the elimination of half day classes on Saturday (NAJAS, n.d.). This change was to foster an emphasis on individual needs (N. Fujji, personal communication, June 12, 1999).

Examination pressure begins in middle school when students take a rigorous examination to enter high school. High schools in Japan are ranked according to status and reputation for matriculating students to prestigious universities. Therefore, entering a highly ranked high school is a prerequisite step to entering a reputable university (*Cross Cultural Comparison*, 1992; Ellington, 2001; Ishizaka, 1998), and a significant first step in determining one's future.

Cramming for exams is a common characteristic of Japanese schools, and to enhance a grade in a subject area, or to earn an accelerated score on an entrance exam, most Japanese children attend one of two different types of private tutoring classes generally held outside of the school, known as *juku* (*Cross-Cultural Comparison*, 1992; Ellington, 2001). One *juku* is to provide students with supplemental information not covered in school in preparation for the examinations, and the second is to remediate students (Shah, 2001) who are struggling with their classroom work. Even though the Ministry of Education regulates the curriculum across the country, changing schools is considered detrimental to a child's academic success, particularly if the school the child previously attended has a reputation for matriculating students to a reputable post-secondary institution (Ellington).

In the United States, students choose schools based on residency or choice. In Japan, school attendance is based on examination results. As Japanese students struggle to achieve academically, there is little opportunity for social or emotional involvement as little time or energy is left to pursue outside interests. Many believe the end result is poor interpersonal skills, isolation, loneliness, and an inability to communicate appropriately (Iwasaki, 2005; Wong, 2003).

After the exhausting years of gaining entrance into a prominent university, the students are able to relax upon attending a postsecondary in-

stitution because graduation is virtually guaranteed. The universities are centers in which the emphasis is on social, political, and athletic events rather than academic pursuits. Class attendance is infrequent and tests are easy. If a test is failed, there are make-up tests and tests to compensate for failing the make-up exams, until passing is a certainty for all (*Cross-Cultural Comparison*, 1992).

### **THE EMERGENCE OF SCHOOL COUNSELORS IN JAPAN**

Prior to the third educational reform, teachers and school nurses were expected to provide assistance to students by playing the role of “counselor,” which consisted of dispensing discipline, encouraging better conduct, increasing motivation, providing career guidance, and offering advice (S. Tatsumi, personal communication July 12, 2006; Wong, 2003). These professionals were not trained in counseling, and it was a duty they disliked (N. Fujii, personal communication, June, 12, 1999). Today, with the advent of the revised educational system, teachers are required to devote time toward “moral education,” yet teachers often choose to use this classroom time for different purposes (Ellington, 2001), depending on their personal educational agenda. With school counselors now available in schools, teachers can now call upon these individuals to assist in preventing and intervening with issues such as truancy, violence, and bullying. However, unlike the school counselor in the United States, it is not the individual trained with a developmental school counseling background who is providing these services, but rather clinical psychologists. Clinical psychologists are now in every Tokyo prefecture, and slowly entering schools in each of the 47 prefectures throughout Japan. To serve as a clinical psychologist in Japan, an individual must pass an examination and possess a master’s degree in clinical psychology. Credentialed individuals who have received a master’s degree from a credentialed school counseling program in other countries are not recognized; only the clinical psychologists are considered qualified to fulfill the school counselor’s role (Fujii, personal communication, June 12, 1999).

Clinical psychologists are primarily placed in middle schools and funded through an education grant. If additional grant monies are available, clinical psychologists are sometimes assigned to elementary or high schools, yet this is a rare occurrence (S. Tatsumi, personal communication, July 12, 2006). Clinical psychologists join the association in the prefecture in which they work due to the opportunities that are available only to its members. For instance, when a school counselor is needed, the association is approached for recommendations to fill the position, a person is

located, and a contract is provided for one year and renewed annually. The prefecture association has several meetings throughout the academic year and principals encourage attendance at these meetings. When a crisis situation occurs in a school, the members provide support to one another in that all of the clinical psychologists in the prefecture would enter the targeted school to check on every student, and to provide assistance.

### ***Perceptions of the Clinical Psychologist as School Counselor***

Teachers' acceptance of clinical psychologists is varied. In some situations teachers believe that these professionals provide support and assistance for students who exhibit difficult behaviors, but in other cases teachers are reluctant to collaborate with school counselors due to confusion about their role and function in the schools (N. Fujii, personal communication, June 12, 1999). A study conducted by Kawamura, Musashi, and Kasuya (2005) investigated junior high teachers', administrators', and school nurses' awareness and perceptions of the effectiveness of school counselors. Unfortunately, both teachers and administrators from schools in which a school counselor was present indicated a lower level of awareness and evaluated counselors' effectiveness much lower than did teachers, administrators, and nurses at schools in which a school counselor was not available. Interestingly, school nurses who worked in schools in which a school counselor was present were more satisfied with the school counseling services in contrast to their colleagues. The authors attribute these differences to the greater collaboration between counselors and school nurses that served to better understand school counselor responsibilities.

In another middle school, Sagara and Ishikuma (2005) investigated administrators' perceptions of school counselors. Prior to the arrival of school counselors, the school nurse had been spending more time with students on their personal issues than on their physical complaints. When a school counselor entered the school, the principal expressed frustration because the counselors seemed to be spending more time in their office rather than engaging in activities that were deemed part of the counselor's responsibilities. It was only when school counselors collaborated with the nurse, who taught them how to communicate and work with teachers, that administrators actually viewed counseling services as being effective.

Japanese students are often reluctant to seek counseling because of the misconceptions and the shame that is associated with counseling. Furthermore, many parents are resistant to counseling in the schools and express embarrassment when their son or daughter is seeing a counselor, or they are dismayed when a teacher refers their child to the counselor.

“Students express that even if they know who their school counselor is, they are cautious of these individuals since the students are concerned as to whether or not these professionals understand the problems of school-aged youth” (N. Fujii, personal communication, June, 12, 1999). Much of the counseling that is now conducted in the Japanese schools is remedial with the individual as the focus; an approach that is contrary to the Asian interdependent view of self (Iwasaki, 2005). This approach may further exacerbate the student’s reluctance to see the school counselor.

## **THE EMERGENCE OF SCHOOL COUNSELORS IN THE UNITED STATES**

The state of the school counseling profession in the United States today is distinct due to some of the dramatic changes that have occurred since its inception in the early 1900s, and marked by the repeated issues that continue to be unsolved. From the vocational issues that first ushered in awareness for guidance, the Progressive Movement turned attention to mental health and social reform (Schmidt, 2008). Personal, social, and moral lessons were infused into the curriculum (Nugent, 2000, as cited in Schmidt) with teachers serving a guidance responsibility in integrating these concepts into their classroom. With the advent of World War I, an emphasis was placed on testing to screen and classify recruits for military positions. As intelligence tests and other assessment inventories were developed, the education profession embraced the use of tests for measuring student growth, and the guidance workers incorporated testing as an additional job responsibility (Schmidt).

It was not until the late 1930s that an approach for assisting students was developed. Dr. E. G. Williamson’s directive, counselor-centered approach to counseling students was created and was later challenged by Dr. Carl Rogers’ non-directive, client-centered approach to counseling (Schmidt, 2008). However, one of the most significant events that impacted the school counseling profession was the launching of Sputnik I. In response to the Soviet Union’s lead in the race for space, the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958 created funds for states to establish school counseling services and for colleges and universities to train individuals for the school counseling profession. School counselors were charged with the task of identifying and guiding academically talented students for the fields of math and science (Herr, 2001, as cited in Studer, 2005; Schmidt).

During the 1960s and 1970s, educational requirements for guidance counselors increased, and due to the passage of the Education for All



Handicapped Student Act (P.L. 94-142) of 1974 (Herr, as cited in Studer, 2005), there was an emphasis on assisting *all* school-aged youth, including those with special needs. These decades were followed by an increase in deleterious behaviors by children and adolescents in which concerns such as drug use, pregnancy, suicide, self-mutilation, and gang membership accompanied unprecedented school violence. In response, greater attention was given to the intervention and prevention skills counselors bring to the school environment (Studer) as strategies for working with these youth.

With the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) signed into law in 2002 (Department of Education, 2007) and the charge for educational institutions to show evidence of student achievement, school counselors and other educational personnel were required to reveal their contribution to the educational mission. To illustrate how the school counseling profession is aligned with educational reform, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), the professional organization that represents and promotes school counseling, developed the ASCA National Model®. This model is a prototype for school counselors to use in developing a comprehensive, developmental school counseling program that is composed of four inter-related components. The Delivery system component describes how the program will be provided; the Foundation component identifies student knowledge, skills, and behavior; the Management component explains the program structure; and Accountability conveys program and personnel effectiveness (American School Counselor Association, 2003). In addition, four integrated themes of leadership, advocacy, systemic change, and collaboration describe school counselor activities within these components.

Although American school counselors have had over a century of history to confront and resolve issues impacting their profession, Japanese school counselors have not had a history of opportunities to learn lessons from their predecessors. However, school counselors in both countries share similar concerns with the issues school-aged youth bring to schools, such as family disruption, truancy and school drop-out, and bullying and aggression. Each of these concerns and its influence on the educational systems is discussed below.

## **DISTURBING INFLUENCES IN THE LIVES OF JAPANESE AND AMERICAN YOUTH**

### ***Family Disruptions***

Japanese mothers of school-aged youth are so intensely involved with their child's education and academic success that it is not uncommon for



this parent to force her child to complete homework or, in some cases, to finish the homework for her child (Shah, 2001). Fathers are rarely home due to intense pressure at work, and mothers, who traditionally stayed at home, are now working and enjoying recognition for their abilities and talents in the work force. Furthermore, domestic violence and child abuse are also emerging as issues within this society (Iwasaki, 2005).

Divorce is now becoming more common in Japan and is considered a contributing factor to the deterioration of the family structure (Iwasaki, 2005). In addition, there are more instances of "in home" divorce in which couples, even though they are officially divorced, live in the same home due to financial difficulties. Yet, even children living in traditional family structures often feel as if they are fatherless since it is common for the father to leave home early in the morning, return late at night, and be available to the family only on Sundays (Y. Yamauchi, personal communication, June 19, 1999). In addition, because of the trend to a one-child family, working parents, and evenings at *juku*, Japanese children have fewer opportunities to socialize and develop friendships (Japanese Education, n.d.). Roles and responsibilities need to be reworked and family involvement in their child's education will be revealed as families adapt to these changes.

In the United States, divorce and remarriage are common events in the lives of families. Today's American family structures are difficult to define due to the myriad configurations. Although the divorce rate is the lowest since 1970, the marriage rate is lower than it has been in previous years (Divorce Statistics, 2002). However, this trend could be due to the myriad family structures that compose society such as single parents, grandparents as legal custodians, gay and lesbian couples, and parents who have never married. Regardless of the family structure, school counselors assist children and adolescents from non-tradition homes who exhibit adjustment difficulties such as poor skill development and lower academic achievement.

### ***Truancy and School Drop-Out***

School truancy in Japan has climbed over the years. In 1999, one out of every 53 students in junior high, and one out of every 378 students in elementary school were truant for more than 30 days (Kobayashi, 1999). Parents, who were once willing to support and comply with school regulations, are now complaining about school policies and defying teachers by pulling children out of school for vacations and other activities (NAJAS Education Page, n.d.). Although the Ministry of Education explains that this trend is a result of the changing home structure, others attribute it to

the rigorous examination process. Some students react to this pressure through “school truancy” or “school phobia” (Kobayashi) or because they are a victim of bullying (Iwasaki, 2005).

In the United States, due to NCLB and other accountability measures, academic success is contributing to low morale, performance anxiety, and debilitating levels of stress in students, which are expressed through physical symptoms and antisocial behaviors (Capuzzi & Gross, 2004; Mulvenon, Stegman, & Ritter, 2005). Furthermore, thousands of American students are truant each day, and school counselors assist these students with this issue and other concerns that accompany non-attendance such as drug abuse, academic difficulties, family concerns, and pregnancy (Fantuzzo, Grim, & Hazan, 2005).

### ***Bullying and Aggression***

Bullying in Japanese schools is a type of violence that is extensive and evident in numerous ways (Kobayashi, 1999). In Japan, “groupism” is a fundamental belief that stresses the importance of the group over the individual. Anyone who is different from his or her peers is a potential target of bullying or *ijime* (Kobayashi), particularly when one’s attitudes are dissimilar from those of peers. Although guns are illegal in Japan, there has been a sharp increase in juvenile crime, murders, and attacks by children against children. Older students victimize the younger students and insult or attack teachers. Yet, mediation, an intervention strategy used by American school counselors, is difficult among Japanese students because the hierarchical social structure makes it difficult for individuals to express a personal opinion (Choy, 1999). In these instances, disagreement smolders and sometimes escalates creating larger problems at a later time. Suicide is a form of aggression turned inward, and the increased suicide rate in Japan is a method of showing responsibility and apologizing for dishonorable behaviors (Iwasaki, 2005).

School counselors in America listed suicide, aggression/violence, grief, abuse, and drugs as the top concerns students bring to school (Allen et al., 2002). Violence, which includes bullying, occurs across socioeconomic boundaries with approximately 15% to 20% of all United States students characterized as victims of bullies (Haliford, Borntrager, & Davis, 2006). Furthermore, suicide is the third leading cause of death among 10 to 14 year olds (Guyer, et al., 1999, as cited in Yexley, Borowsky, & Ireland, 2002).

Despite the differences in the educational, political, and cultural and economic systems in Japan and the United States, school counselors are called upon to assist school-aged youth. Although American school coun-

selors are a relatively new profession and have had over a century of professional evolution, these professionals are still resolving issues that their predecessors have tried to answer in previous decades. For instance, the role and function has historically been and continues to be a source of debate despite the best efforts of the ASCA. Likewise, role identification among Japanese counselors needs clarification in order to address the concerns of the school (Picklesimer & Williams, 1999). "Japanese society needs to recognize that these individuals are pioneers working in uncharted territory" (N. Fujii, personal communication, June 12, 1999). Although Japanese school counselors are a recent addition in Japanese schools, the question remains: Can Japanese school counselors learn from the mistakes and successes of their American counterparts, or will these professionals forge a new path?

### **A NEW PASSAGE OR STEPPING ON THE SAME PATH?**

Educational reform in Japan ushered in school counselors as a means to assist with the societal dilemmas that were plaguing Japanese youth. Similarly, in America "guidance workers" entered schools due to the need for vocational guidance for students (Sanrock, 1996). In Japan, teachers and nurses initially provided "counseling" services, often in the form of giving advice. Likewise, in America, teachers were initially called upon to provide guidance to their students.

The recognition for advanced training and education for school counselors surfaced in both countries. In the United States most states require a master's degree, which is also required by clinical psychologists in Japan. In the United States, clear boundaries and specializations have been established between licensed clinical psychologists and counselors, yet in Japan specialties are blurred (Kawamura et al., 2005).

Due to educational reform, the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) developed the ASCA National Model® as a template to support a developmental, preventive school counseling program that is integral to the educational mission of the school (American School Counselor Association, 2003). In contrast, Japanese school counselors initially worked under a clinical model but are now moving to a community model (Picklesimer & Williams, 1999). At this time comprehensive, preventative programs in Japan are not established (Ayako, 2004). For example, classroom guidance, an element of the ASCA Delivery system, is an integral responsibility for American school counselors at all levels, yet Japanese school nurses and homeroom teachers (Picklesimer & Williams) appear to have the responsibility for conducting psychoeducational programs

that merge the concepts of “comprehensive study” and “mind education” (Hayes & Kameguchi, 2001).

American school counselors are trained in group and individual counseling and are part of the ASCA responsive services within the Delivery system of the ASCA National Model®. However, Japanese school counselors are trained predominately in Jungian psychodynamic theories with few of these individuals experienced in group work (Hayes & Kameguchi, 2001).

Traditional Western counseling approaches emphasize an *independent* view of self, which is counter to the Japanese *interdependent* concept of self (Iwasaki, 2005). When a Western approach to counseling is used with Japanese students, undesirable results may occur (Iwasaki). Although there is a push for greater individuality with the latest educational reform, educators are concerned because it is seen as opposing the group balance and challenging harmony (Japanese Education Today, n.d.). Even though the hierarchical social structures are not as firm as they were traditionally, social-contextual counseling interventions are advocated (Iwasaki), yet this transformation in philosophy will need to be made slowly and cautiously due to the bullying that occurs when individuals are different from their peers.

Finally, the Japanese principal plays an important role in determining the tasks that the clinical psychologist is to perform and how these assignments are to be accomplished. For instance, the principal needs to be consulted when an outside referral is needed, even when the counselor is making a report of suspected abuse. Confidentiality, a cornerstone of the counseling profession in Western society, is not part of the clinical psychologist associations' ethical code since disclosure of what was discussed is commonplace. When referring a student for counseling outside the school, the Japanese counselor needs to consult with the principal before the referral can be made, making confidentiality difficult to maintain. Furthermore, it is not unusual for clinical psychologists to engage in private mental health counseling as a second employment opportunity. In America few school counselors have the credentials to practice outside of the school arena.

Time will tell whether the Japanese school counseling structure will eventually adapt a developmental model similar to that proposed by the ASCA, if cultural and political agendas will steer the profession to a new direction, or whether American school counselors can learn from the efforts of Japanese school counselors as they evolve through educational reform.

## SUMMARY

The lack of confidence in the Japanese educational system brought about the third educational reform. This restructuring includes a greater emphasis on creativity, problem-solving, leisure activities, and moral education. To address the increasing concerns youth bring to the schools, school counselors are now entering Japanese schools. However, it is not the school counselor who has been trained in a developmental, comprehensive approach to counseling, but rather the clinical psychologist who is fulfilling this role. Just as school counselors in the United States have continually struggled with role identity, these emerging professionals are engaged in a similar battle. The groundwork laid by the Japanese school counselors will eventually answer many questions such as: Will counseling in Japan become more accepted? Will a developmental approach emerge in response to the needs of school-aged youth? What can school counselors in the United States learn from the struggles of these professionals? As school counselors in Japan chart their path in uncharted territory, the answers to these questions will eventually be learned.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Hiro Ishima, Norika Sakamoto, and Satoko Tatsumi for their assistance with this article.