2 The School Environment

Having looked at the historical development of education, it is reasonable to consider in brief the education itself, its content and the school environment in which it is imparted. Starting from a very non-pressurised, non-competitive environment in kindergarten and primary school, pupils move up the line to increasingly differentiated and competitive situations. We consider the choices which parents and pupils must make as they navigate their way through this hierarchical system which, in many ways, determines the course of their future life. Finally, we discuss, briefly, the reasons for the popularity of the educational system in Japan – in contrast to the disfavour with which the educational system is currently viewed in the USA, the UK and much of the Western world.

KINDERGARTEN

Elementary school in Japan requires attendance by all children who have reached the age of 6 by the first day of school – 1 April each year. This age is rigidly enforced; there are no provisions for early entry by precocious children or delayed entry for slower ones. But before entering elementary school, more than 75 per cent of Japanese children will have attended a kindergarten for one to three years, or have had some other formal schooling from tutors in reading and writing. In the Japanese conception of home and school, there are few continuities of appropriate behaviour for children in the two settings. The chief value of kindergarten, therefore, is to ease the transition of children into the very different set of demands which they will face in elementary school.

In the Japanese view, the major difference between home and school is that children must adjust to and participate in group life at school. That is, a child must move from home, where the ordinary child-rearing patterns have led him to believe that there is no distinction between his own desires and what is desired for him by his parents (read: mother). In psychological terms, Japanese child-rearing practices, which are quite uniform throughout the society, are not
intended to foster independence and a sense of separate self in children, but rather to gain necessary compliance by minimising overt demands on children, and by encouraging them to want what their mothers want, because of an emotional bond between mother and child. Japanese mothers not only reason less with their children, but also are less authoritarian than American mothers. In addition, they are willing to absorb more verbal and physical abuse than is common in American homes, with no overt signs of anger or anything other than patient long-suffering. Since there are few children in a family, and competition for the mother’s attention is limited, children come to feel that it is normal for the world in general to be organised as they would prefer it.

This is not to say that pre-school Japanese children are not well-behaved. They seem remarkably well-behaved, in situations that Americans regard as trying for children, such as relatively long rides on public transportation, or accompanying their mothers on the many errands that are part of the housewife’s job in modern Japan. They also absorb very early a concern for decorum that requires a great deal of discipline. At one kindergarten sports day which we observed, for instance, not only were the 3-, 4- and 5-year-old students in attendance, but there were many younger siblings. We ate lunch seated on plastic groundsheets, with shoes placed neatly off the cloths. The young children were not required to stay still all during the meal, but jumped up and down, ran off to play and returned for a few more bites. By the age of 2 children in this group could be trusted to remember to take off their shoes each time they returned to the cloths, and to put them on again to play.

But pre-schools in Japan emphasise to children and parents that in school the demands of group life take precedence over individual impulses, and they teach this concept through highly ritualised group activities. Snacks or meals, for instance, are conducted differently. At home, families rarely sit down for a joint meal, and children typically eat as they play, or eat a bit, play, then return for more food. At kindergartens, however, a lunch requires that all children sit at once at assigned seats, that they arrange their lunch-boxes in a prescribed way, wait to be served drinks by other pupils, listen to announcements by teachers, eat together, eat all their meal, and remain sitting together until everyone is finished. Other group activities, such as listening to stories, also encourage long spans of attention and respect for the group. In the groups that we observed, potentially disruptive behaviours were given minimal attention. A teacher would not