

The Importance of Humor in Japanese Early Childhood Education*

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Introduction

A two year old boy saw a slug and said "Oh, Look! This snail lost his house (Group Erusoru eds., 1987). A three year old girl took the subway for the first time and looked out the rear window. She said "Look! The tracks are chasing us." (Group Erusoru, eds., 1987) When a day care center teacher told the children that they could do anything they wanted, one boy decided to go home and watch T.V.¹⁾ The teacher looked all over for the missing boy. The boy had interpreted the teacher's directions literally. These are examples of Japanese children's humor. Every child has a sense of humor, no matter what culture the child lives in. However, it is often said that the Japanese do not have a sense of humor (Oda, 1986). If this is true, why do Japanese lose their sense of humor when they grow up? One Japanese cultural factor which affects their lack of humor is the concept of "seriousness" (Oda, 1986). This is overemphasized and is regarded as the most important element for success in Japanese society (U.S. Study of Education in Japan eds., 1987).

A public opinion survey which examined conditions for success in the U.S. and Japan indicated that Japanese believe that effort is the most important ingredient, while Americans believe that ability and talent are most important for success in society (NHK Survey of Public Opinion Research Institution eds., 1983). The term "gambare" which means "to persevere" (or, as Americans say, "Hang in there!") is used in Japanese society much more frequently than the equivalent phrase in American English (Duke, 1986). "Gambare," is used at work at school and even at play and leisure. This fact aptly illustrates the Japanese belief in the supremacy of diligence and perseverance.

However, recently many Japanese have started to realize that too much seriousness can be dangerous to their health since it can sometimes cause stress and burnout. To avoid these problems, they are trying to spend more time relaxing and taking vacations in order to relieve

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unnecessary stress.

Dr. Masahiro Mori (1984), and industrial robot inventor, introduced a concept related to this area. His purpose was to help define the problem and the solution within Japanese society. Dr. Mori categorizes three types of seriousness; "fu-majime" meaning "not serious", "majime" meaning "serious" and "hi-majime" meaning "moderately serious".²⁾ He provides a helpful illustration to make the distinction clear. Imagine some flies which are struggling to get out of a room through a window. The "majime" or "serious" fly will fly into the window over and over, and eventually will burn out, besides getting a terrible headache. The "fu-majime" or "not serious" fly won't even look at the window! The "hi-majime," or "moderately serious" fly will patiently fly around and find the open space between the windows and successfully escape from the room.

The best definition of "a sense of humor" that I have been able to find comes from Dr. Mori's definition of "hi-majime." He defines it as "an attitude or ability that enables one to see things from a different perspectives". Like the moderately serious fly who looks for alternatives ways in rather than doing nothing or ramming his head repeatedly against the window, so the person with a sense of humor avoids problems and roadblocks by looking at problems from a different angle.

Humor and Communication Style

This lack of humor is also seen when comparing American and Japanese communication styles. Goldman (1988) points out that Japanese communication is greatly influenced by the rank and position of a person, while in America this is not a very important factor. For this reason, in Japan, there is a tendency to keep personal matters very private and communicate very little about one's own views and home life for fear of saying the wrong thing to a socially inferior or superior person (Barnlund, 1975; Goldman, 1988). This is not only true of verbal communication but also non-verbal communication (Barnlund, 1975). Japanese tend to suppress their facial and physical expressions. Although Japanese are quite sensitive and place a lot of value on emotion, they tend to avoid free expression of inner feelings. Since the Japanese prefer not to express themselves openly, they tend to hide emotions such as joy, sadness and anger when they are with other people (Oda, 1986). In this way Japanese people have learned to suppress their laughter and expressions of humor. As a result they are often seen as being, and outwardly anyway, often are humorless.

The values of a culture (such as a work ethic, social roles, etc..) are passed on largely through family relations. Schools also play a undeniably important role though. In 1984 the Third Great Educational Reform was instituted to address some of the problems in Japan

caused by rigidity and uniformity. This legislation was an attempt to encourage greater individuality, creativity and flexibility which have not been adequately emphasized in the past. My thesis in this presentation is that humor can be one effective tool to meet the current needs in Japanese early childhood education as spelled out in the Third Great Educational Reform measure. I believe that it will also ultimately help Japanese society with its struggles and problems caused by a lack of effective communication with other nations. I would like to discuss three ways how humor can help to improve current Japanese early childhood education.

1. How humor can improve communication skills.
2. How humor can help teachers and children to reduce tension.
3. How humor can improve creativity and flexibility in the classroom.

How humor can improve communication skills.

In Japan, the number of nuclear-families has increased (Nihon Sogo Aiiku Kenkyu-kai eds., 1991, p.42). Not only has the average size of families become smaller, the birth rate has decreased (Nihon Sogo Aiiku Kenkyu-kai eds., 1991, p.28). In 1989 the birth rate fell to 1.57. This was labeled the "1.57" shock." In former times, children could learn how to interact with others when they were in an extended family which consisted of members from different generations. Today's kids are often only children (Nihon Sogo Aiiku Kenkyu-kai eds., 1991, p.43).

The changing lifestyles of Japanese children also affects the lack of communication skills. It's typical for many Japanese children today to confine themselves to their rooms for hours to play video games (Osumi, 1987). This limits their amount of social interaction (Osumi, 1987). Going to a "Juku" can also severely limit children's amount of social interaction (Hirayama eds., 1988). It is not unusual to see a preschooler spend the whole afternoon going to a juku and not having time to play with other children.

Because of these reasons schools play a more important role in helping to develop interpersonal skills for today's children. By modeling and encouraging humor in the classroom teachers can help students develop a valuable component of effective social development. Since it is difficult not to like someone who makes you laugh, children who learn to become more skilled at producing humor in social contexts would be more popular among their peers and find it easier to develop new friendships. Humor can make social interaction easier and more enjoyable. Someone who knows when and how to use humor makes others relaxed and creates an environment in which all forms of communication are easier.

How humor can help children and teachers to reduce tension.

At first I would like to explain the idea of "credentialism" in Japanese society and how it causes tension for both the teacher and student. Japanese tend to seek vertical advancement in their careers and status within a given work-place. The advancement of status is based on lifetime employment, to which the majority of Japanese aspire. Therefore, initial employment at a desired work-place immediately after graduation from a university is crucial to an individual's career and social success. Major employers are interested in hiring graduates from elite universities so credentials from these universities are very important for a person's future. The competition for admission to the elite universities is extremely intense for these reasons.

Preschool education in Japan is beginning to reflect the pressures of parental concern with academic achievement in the school years ahead (U.S. Study of Education in Japan eds., 1987). They worry that their children may not be able to keep up once they enter school. Masaru Ibuka (1971), the head of the Sony Corporation wrote a book called "Kindergarten Is Too Late," which became a best-selling book. In this book he insisted that the most effective time to engage a child in learning is the very early years. This pressure to perform well even at an early age has created a lot of stress teacher and student.

Another very visible producer of tension for Japanese teachers is class size (Duke, 1986; Horiuchi, 1985). Classes are very large in many Japanese preschools. As provided by law, a class can have up to 40 students per teacher in Japanese kindergarten. Consequently, it is very difficult to give an individual child attention and help in the class, although the emphasis on individuality is considered a fundamental guiding principle in the Third Great Educational Reform large classes are still the norm.

Teachers are "on duty" after school hours and during vacations. After the students are dismissed preschool teachers stay until the evening to clean the classroom, to consider daily planning and to prepare for the next day. Recently preschool teaching was identified as "3K" occupations. The 3K stands for "kitsui" or hard, "kyuryogasukunai" or low paying and "kyukaganai" for "no vacation."

Another reason why Japanese teachers are so stressed is the "Senpai" or senior and "kohai" or junior relationships in school settings in Japan. Usually a junior needs to obey a senior's approach faithfully. On the other hand, the senior feels responsible to teach and help the junior. Therefore, it is very difficult for new teachers to freely express their own opinions and ideas or for old teachers to give responsibility to their junior's. Even if a junior thinks of a wonderful idea, she may have to wait until she becomes a senior to use it. Unfortunately, friction in human relationships is the main reason for teachers quitting preschools.³⁾

Humor can help to relieve this predominant stress for children and teachers. Since humor

is often defined as an ability to look at a situation in various ways, it may enable a person to find a light in darkness. Preschool teachers can use humor to help children to relieve their stress, anxieties, depression and difficulties. Positive uses of humor can strengthen relationships between children and teachers. It can also create an informal and warm atmosphere in which both children and teachers can freely express their opinions. Teaching can become more enjoyable when teachers use humorous techniques and ideas in the classroom.

How humor can improve creativity and flexibility in the classroom.

Finally, I would like to discuss how humor can promote creativity and flexibility which are considered to be weak points in Japanese education. Japanese society places a high value on harmony in interpersonal relations and the ability to cooperate with others (e.g. Barnland, 1975). They work hard toward common goals rather than their own personal goals. Japanese schools reflect this cultural priority. Even in preschool, classroom activities are structured to encourage participation in group activities in order to emphasize the responsibility of individual children, and to develop group loyalty. Teachers try to foster group cohesion and a strong group bond by avoiding overt recognition of differences in individual ability. This great emphasis on group activities and social consensus results in considerable conformity in behavior. This might be related to why Japanese has produced only five Nobel Prize winners compared to 159 awards to American.

Humor can help to encourage flexibility and creativity because, as I've mentioned several times before, it is defined as being an ability to look at things from various viewpoints. I believe teachers would find it helpful to develop curriculum that is both humorous and creative for this reason.

Conclusion

In Japan, research in humor is still in its infancy. I have only just made the first step in my own studies in this particular field. I strongly believe that more and more Japanese need to realize the importance of humor in their lives. Humor is not just defined as something "fun". According to Alfons Deeken (1986), a philosopher and anthropologist in Japan, humor is the most concrete and beautiful expression of love, because the purpose of using humor is to produce a joyous and warm atmosphere for the sake of others.

As I said before, I believe every child has a sense of humor. Humor and laughter are not taught to children. They are drawn out of them and it's important that we learn how to do this if the goals of Third Great Educational Reform legislation are to be realized. Perhaps through this process it is we adults who will learn from children how to find humorous aspects in our

lives.

Notes

1. This episode was reported by a student at kindergarten observation class in Hokuriku Gakuin Jr. College.
2. Dr. Kokubu Yasutaka also introduced different types of seriousness and described an ideal seriousness as a person who is able to look at the situation objectively and choose what is best for him/herself and others.
3. In 1993 National Day Care Center Teacher Training Seminar reported the main reason of quitting teaching job as 1) friction between staffs, 2) hard work and 3) incompatibility with school policy.

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