

HUMOR, THE MISSING ELEMENT IN JAPANESE EDUCATION*

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Abstract

An initial investigation into the causes behind the lack of humor in Japanese education. One of the Japanese cultural factors which affects the lack of humor is "seriousness." This is overemphasized and regarded as the most important element in succeeding in Japanese society and in education. Since in formal places such as school, humor is looked on as not taking the situation seriously, it is difficult to stress the need for humor in Japanese education. However, recently, Japanese society has come to recognize the lack of creativity, flexibility, spontaneity and relaxation. Therefore, various researchers are suggesting that underlining humor in Japanese education would promote the development of such qualities.

I . Introduction

It is often pointed out that the Japanese do not have a sense of humor. This idea was originally expressed by Lin Yutang, a chinese Journalist and author, who compared the character of seven major countries.

R₃D₂H₂S₁=The English

R₂D₄H₁S₁=The Russians

R₂D₃H₃S₃=The French

R₂D₃H₁S₁=The Japanese

R₃D₃H₂S₂=The Americans

R₄D₁H₃S₃=The Chinese

R₃D₄H₁S₂=The Germans

"R" stand for a sense of reality (or realism), "D" for dreams (or idealism), "H" for a sense of humor and "S" for sensitivity.

*A preliminary abbreviated version of this report was presented at the 8th International Conference on Humor in University of Sheffield, England, July 1990.

NORIKO OKUDA

· "4" stand for "abnormally high," "3" stand for "high," "2" stand for "fair," and "1" stand for "low."
 (Yutang, 1937, p.6-7)

In a comparison of seven nations and their characteristics, the Japanese scored "low" in the sense of humor category. Although this is entirely his own personal opinion and is not supported by research, many people have the same general impression of the Japanese people.

On the other hand, through its long history, Japan has developed a culture which enjoys laughter. We see this in traditional Japanese drama and literature. For example the "senryu", which is a comical poem, can be very humorous to the Japanese people. Even nowadays, Japanese people laugh a lot and enjoy telling jokes with friends. Therefore, it is inaccurate to say that Japanese do not enjoy laughter or humor.

In certain areas of Japanese society, however, there doesn't seem to be a strong emphasis on humor. Seriousness is regarded as one of the most important elements of success in Japanese society and in education. A public opinion survey indicated this, as shown in Figure 1 (NHK Yoron-Chosa Shiryoshu (NHK Survey of Public Opinion Research Data) vol.3, 1983, p.1831). The results show that the Japanese believe that effort is most important, while the American's believe that ability and talent are most important for succeeding in society.

Moreover, the term "gambare" (persevere) which is frequently used in Japanese society and school indicate that the Japanese believe success is due to the result of diligence and perseverance. In Benjamin Duke's book, *The Japanese School*, he introduced the concept of "gambare" for describing the characteristics of the Japanese.

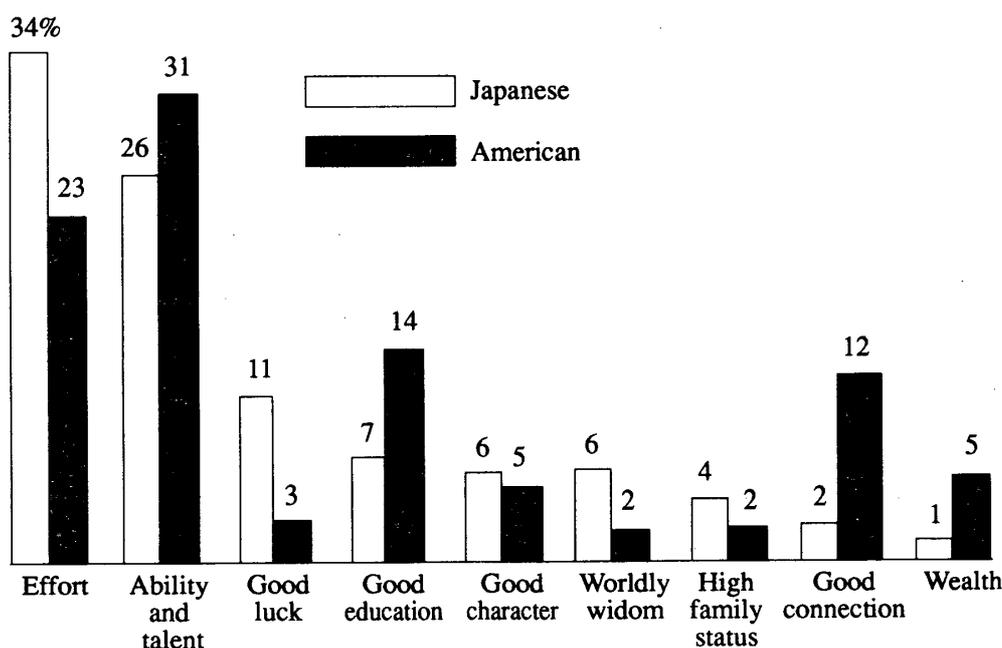


Fig. 1 Conditions for Success

HUMOR, THE MISSING ELEMENT IN JAPANESE EDUCATION

One of the major motivating spirits that has buoyed this society through adversity in its tenacious pursuit of postwar national regeneration can best be illustrated by the exclamation, "Gambare!" "Persevere!" "Endure!" "Don't give up!" Throughout the lifetime of the Japanese they are surrounded, encouraged, and motivated by the spirit of gambare. It begins in the home. The school takes it up from the first day the child enters the classroom. It continues through graduation. The company then thrives on it. It engulfs every facet of society. It is employed in work, study, and even at play and leisure. Gambare is integral to being Japanese.

(Duke, 1986, p.122)

Recently Japanese have started to realize that too much seriousness is considered to be dangerous in their lives since it can sometimes cause burn-out and stress. To avoid these problems, they are trying to spend more time relaxing and recreating in order to relieve unnecessary stress. I think a relaxing and recreational atmosphere can possibly encourage humor. Conversely, humor itself can also encourage relaxation. Perhaps Japanese society needs to pay more attention to the importance of humor.

In 1984 there was the third great educational reform which following the American Occupation Reforms immediately after World War 2. This was initiated by Prime Minister Nakasone. He created the National Council on Education Reform which existed for a 3 year period of time. The council had 25 members, drawn from various areas of the society, including the academic community. The major reason for the reform was to do away with the deeply-rooted uniformity and rigidity in the Japanese educational system. The council made the following recommendations. A greater emphasis on individuality, fundamentals, creativity, expansion of choice, the humanization of the educational environment, lifelong learning, internationalism, and dealing with the information age. The dignity of individuals was considered to be the fundamental principle.

In this paper, I would like to first of all discuss the relationship between the Japanese sense of humor and cultural values. Secondly, I want to talk about the relationship between sense of humor and communication style. I will explain some of the background of Japanese culture and its overemphasis on seriousness. Thirdly, I would like to explain the Japanese educational system which also overemphasizes seriousness and deemphasizes humor. The stress of students and teachers which occurs in the educational system will be discussed as well. Finally, I will introduce the viewpoints of two Japanese educators who insist on the importance of humor in Japanese education.

II. Japanese Cultural Values and Communication Style

A. Cultural Values and Humor

It is well known that Japan is a highly group-oriented society. Accordingly, a high value is placed on harmony in interpersonal relations and the ability to cooperate with others.

Japanese companies usually want to hire hard working people who work towards the goal of the company rather than towards their own personal goals. Companies also seek people who are diligent, loyal and cooperative. Independent, unique and creative people are sometimes kept at a distance, because they may disturb the group norm. Qualities such as independence, uniqueness and creativity are generally stressed in Western countries. Although Japanese companies' expectations are beginning to move towards Western societies' way of thinking, such group-oriented norms still prevail, especially within public institutions.

Japanese schools reflect these group-oriented values. Particularly at the elementary level, school is a place for learning to be socialized. Teachers are eager to foster group loyalty. In Japanese school the following qualities are emphasized by teachers of moral education classes, in the order given:

1. Diligence
2. Endurance
3. Ability to decide to do the hard thing
4. Wholehearted dedication
5. Cooperativeness

(White, 1987, p.45)

At the same time, a 1981 survey shows what Japanese and American mothers regard as the most important characteristics of a "good" child (White, 1987, p.40). They were asked to select the three most important characteristics. The results are in Figure 2. As shown in the graph, Japanese mothers prefer children whose habits are regular, who avoid causing trouble for others, and who persevere. On the other hand, American mothers prefer children with independence, initiative and tolerance of different opinion.

The cultural emphasis on virtues such as diligence and endurance requires that each child contribute to the group effort. The Japanese believe that these virtues make a child successful in education as well as in other aspects of life, while developing one's innate abilities is regarded as less important for success.

Humor is often defined as an ability to look at one thing from various perspectives. This

HUMOR, THE MISSING ELEMENT IN JAPANESE EDUCATION

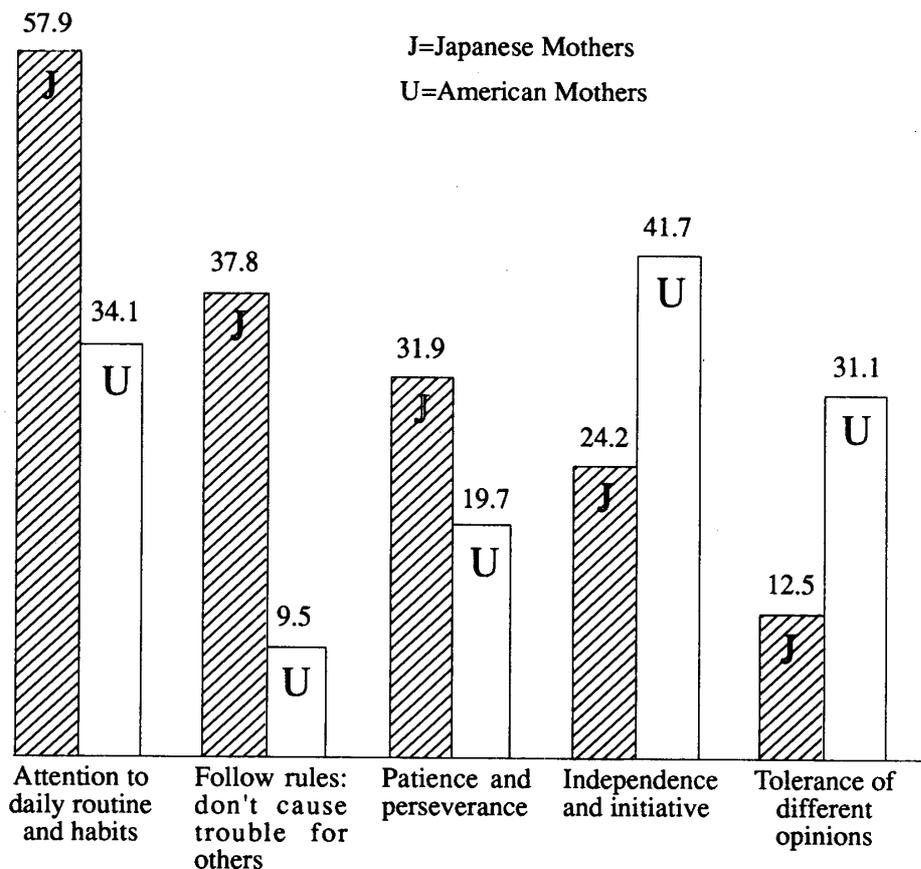


Fig. 2

requires a flexible and a playful frame of mind. Qualities like diligence and endurance seem to be products of a more serious frame of mind. Because of the strong emphasis on seriousness in the Japanese value system, there isn't much opportunity for humor.

B. Communication Style and Humor

When comparing American and Japanese communication, Goldman (1988) claims that Japanese communication is greatly influenced by the rank and position of a person. There is a tendency to keep personal matters very private and communicate very little about one's own views and home life (Barnlund, 1975; Goldman, 1988). This is true not only in verbal communication but also in non-verbal communication. 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. This is especially true with first encounters. It is said that most Japanese would consider it impolite to call too much attention to themselves or to want to be in the spotlight in a social or business interaction.

This communication style seems to be related to sense of humor in Japan. Since the Japanese do not prefer to express themselves openly, they tend to hide emotions such as joy,

NORIKO OKUDA

sadness and anger when they are with other people. As a result, they are often seen as being unable to understand or appreciate humor. Moreover, communication is strongly influenced by whom one is talking to as well as the occasion. For example, it would be regarded as impolite or inappropriate if a person told a joke to their boss during a business meeting (Oda, 1986). Because of such social restrictions, Japanese people have learned to control their laughter and humor.

III . Japanese Education

A. Problems of the Japanese School

The current movement for educational reform is a response to the increasing criticisms of uniformity and rigidity found in the Japanese educational system. The examination system is often criticized, because it puts enormous pressure on students. Many difficult related problems arise such as violence against teachers and parents, school phobia, dropping out, bullying among pupils, juvenile suicide and so on. In Japanese "tokokyohi" is a word which is roughly translated as "school phobia" ; that is, students who refuse to go to school. Among these problems, school phobia and bullying in schools are the most serious problems in Japanese society today.

There are an increasing number of students who refuse to go to school in Japan. In figure 3, school phobia is limited to students who miss more than 50 days in one school year because they say they do not like school (Asahi-Nenkan 1990 (Asahi Yearbook 1990), p. 172). We can see an increase from 10,000 students with "school phobia" in 1977 to 35,000 in 1988 among junior high school students. At the same time, the number of elementary students with "school phobia" increased only slightly.

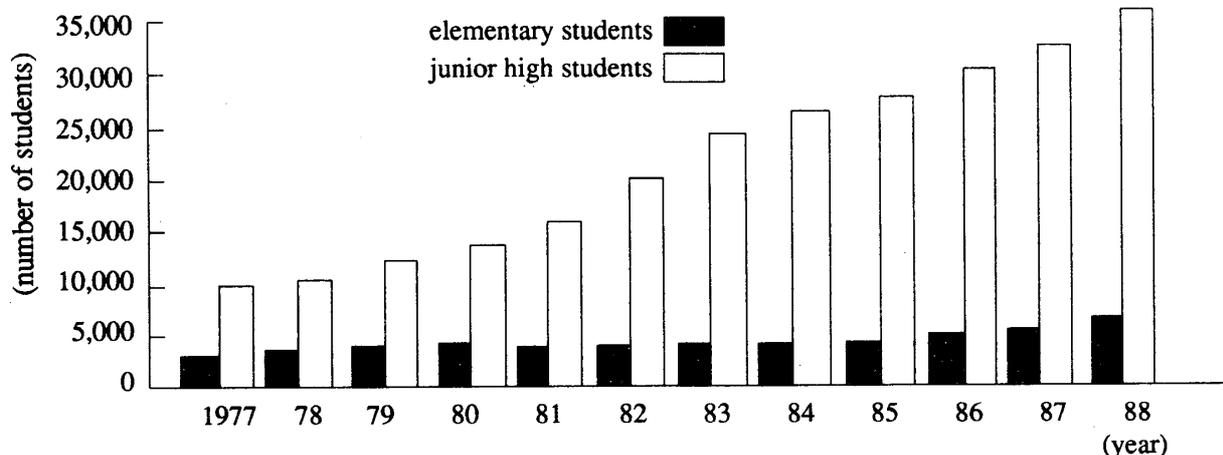


Fig. 3 Changes in the Number of Students Who Refuse to Go to School.

B. Possible Causes for the Problems in the Educational System in Japan

1. Competing to Go to Elite Schools

First of all, I would like to speak about "credentialism" in Japanese society. Japanese tend to seek vertical advancement in their careers and status within a given workplace. The enhancement of status is based on lifetime employment, to which the majority of Japanese aspire. Therefore, initial employment by a desired workplace immediately after graduation from the university is crucial to an individual's career and social success.

Major employers are interested in hiring graduates from elite universities, University credentials are very important for a person's future. Therefore, the competition for admission to those elite universities becomes desperately intense.

2. Examination Hell

The term for the exams frequently used among the Japanese is shiken jigoku or "examination hell." This describes the profound tension that these exams create in the lives of adolescents. Because of these exams, the ability of students tends to be measured by a single test. From a very young age, students are always under a lot of pressure and have intense anxieties about their scores.

3. After-School Classes

Because of the highly competitive race for gaining admission to top schools, both parents and students worry that regular schooling does not satisfactorily provide the preparation for entrance examinations. Therefore, increasing numbers of children attend jukus or after-school classes. Jukus attract students of all ages. Figure 4 shows the juku attendance by grade level. This is a preliminary report on students' out-of-school learning activities in 1985 by the Ministry of Education (Monbusho, 1986). Juku attendance rates rise from 6.2 percent of all children in the 1st grade of elementary school to 47.3 percent by the 3rd year of lower secondary school.

Even on Sunday morning, students can be seen making their way to jukus. On weeknights it is not unusual to see even small elementary school students coming home after 9 p.m. The struggle to get into a prestigious school escalates as they go on to senior high school. One kind of juku, called yobiko, is for high school graduates who choose to devote a year or more of full time study in order to prepare for or retake the college entrance exams. The juku boom is not likely to disappear as these schools fill an educational need not met by the regular school system.

NORIKO OKUDA

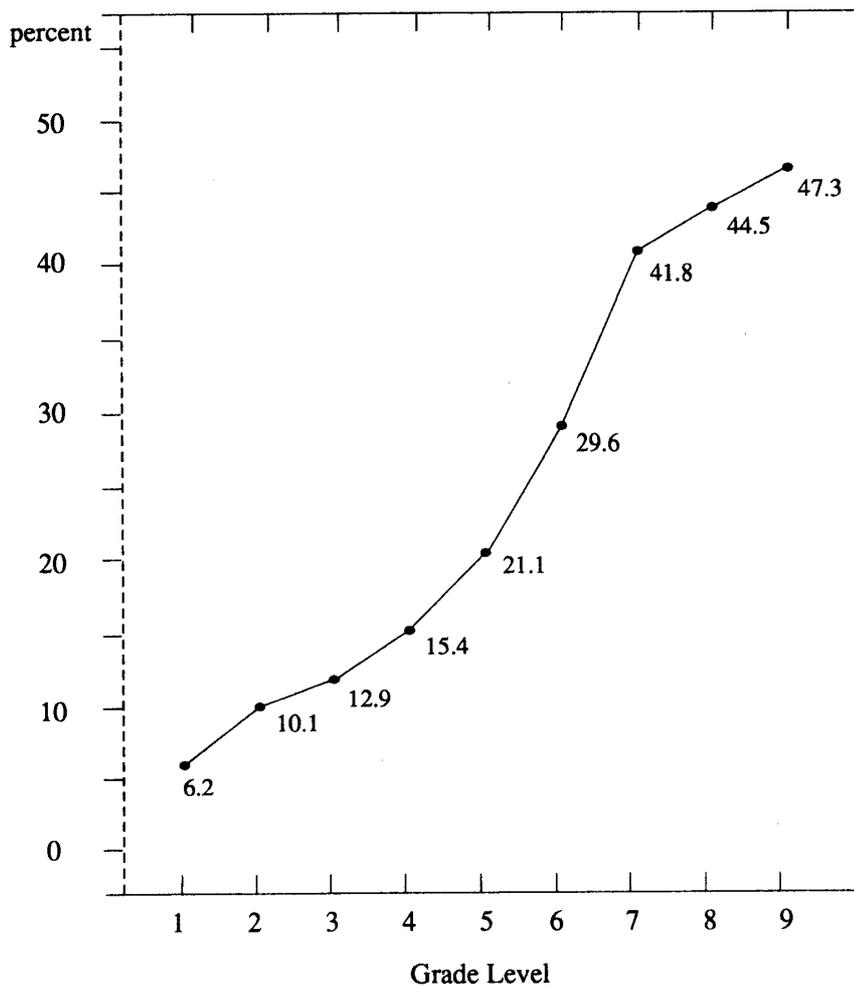


Fig. 4 Juku Attendance Rates by Grade Level Through Compulsory Education.

C. School System and Stress in Japanese Education

1. Student Stress

Because of the examination system, one feels superior to those who get poorer grades and inferior to those who get better grades. So, a student's value as an individual is likely to be judged by their grades and the school they go to. Consequently, students are always frustrated and worried about their grades.

The frustration is due not only to the Japanese examination system, but also to the intensity of Japanese schooling. Japanese students attend school 240 days a year, compared to only 180 days in the U.S. Japanese students attend school five and a half days a week, while American students attend five days a week. Moreover, Japanese students spend much more time on homework than American students. Homework is also given when school is not in session. Because the Japanese academic year starts in early spring, the summer months are not a rest period. For students preparing for the high school and college entrance examinations, summer is an especially critical time for studying.

HUMOR, THE MISSING ELEMENT IN JAPANESE EDUCATION

2. Teacher Stress

School is a very stressful place not only for Japanese students but also for Japanese teachers. At the primary and the secondary levels, they teach not only specialized subjects but are also expected to help students with academic and personal problems. Teachers feel responsible for their students' discipline, behavior and morality. They are "on duty" after school hours and during vacations, and supervise vacation play and study. They even have to sometimes visit students' families at home, and are available to parents who have questions and anxieties about their children.

TABLE 1 A COMPARISON OF CURRICULAR REGULATIONS, TEACHER GUIDELINES, AND SUPPORTING FACILITIES FOR SCIENCE EDUCATION

	Japan	United States
National/federal	National standards Course of Study <ul style="list-style-type: none"> { subjects { objectives { contents { time 	No standards
Prefectural/state		Subject (science) "A district shall provide the following coordinated and supervised course of study" (Illinois state)
School district	Some school districts have programs based on national standards.	Course of study or program <ul style="list-style-type: none"> { objectives { contents { topics { time allotment
School	Some schools have schedules based on course of study and textbook.	Individual schools set their course of study based on "Scope and Sequence" charts or teachers set course of study.
Textbook	Censorship of textbook by Ministry of Education Adoption by textbook district (496 districts)	School district, individual schools, or teacher choose textbook.
Teacher	Teachers use teachers' manual, Akahon and students' workbook accompanying textbook. Regulation for supplementary materials	Teachers use teachers' manual, supplementary books for teacher, magazines, and student workbooks.
Facilities and equipment	Most schools have a science room. Facilities and equipment are provided by Law for Promotion of Science Education. Science Education Center	Science room Science "center" or regular classroom

NORIKO OKUDA

Due to the examination system in Japan, parents are always worried about their children's grades. Many times parents ask teachers to put more academic pressure on their children to make them work harder. Sometimes a teacher's reputation is based on their students' exam results. Since the teachers are worried about their reputation, improving the grades and exam scores of all their students become their primary goal. However, the large size of Japanese schools makes it difficult for teachers to improve their students' competence. The average classroom has about 45 students. It is almost impossible to give an individual child attention and help during the class period.

The centrality of Japanese schooling is another reason why teachers feel pressure. The Ministry of Education has authority over the entire official system of education, particularly at the elementary and secondary school levels. It prescribes the curricula, academic standards, and censors all textbooks. Accordingly schools are guided by detailed national standards, as well as by a uniform curriculum that is presented in the same scope and sequence in every school in the nation. Although textbooks are produced privately by publishers, all of them must be planned to match the guidelines issued by the Ministry of Education and receive approval by the Ministry. Table 1 shows a comparison of curricular regulations, teacher guidelines, and supporting facilities for science education (Inagaki, 1986, p.88). As can be seen from the table, curricular and textbook regulations are stricter in Japan than in the U.S.A. Due to the restrictive tendency of the central educational administration, teaching style, materials and resources are rigid and controlled. Although Japanese success in improving students' academic performance is due partly to the centrality of school administration, teachers feel frustrated because they do not have the freedom to decide what to teach or how to teach it.

IV · Research on Humor in Japanese Education

In Japan only a little humor research has been done in the area of education. Only two books have been published; one is *Yumoa Kyoiku no Susume: Igrisu ni Manabu Kosodate no Chie* (*Encouraging Humor in Education: Learning from British Child-rearing Wisdom*) by Tadashi Matsuoka in 1987. The other one is *Kodomo no Yumoa: Odoke Fuzake no Shinri* (*Children's Humor: The Psychology of Clowning and Joking*) by Nobuyoshi Hirai in 1989.

A. Tadashi Matsuoka's Book

Matsuoka initially focuses on the emotional stress inflicted on Japanese students by the competitive examination system. He suggests that educators or parents should foster the child's sense of humor which could help overcome the stress and frustration caused by the Japanese educational system. He defines a person who has a sense of humor as one who is

HUMOR, THE MISSING ELEMENT IN JAPANESE EDUCATION

wise and mentally strong enough to keep calm and to find his way out of difficulties when he faces obstacles. According to Matsuoka, this is the kind of personality that people in Britain try to encourage when raising their children. In the last chapter, he recommends three principles for fostering a sense of humor; 1) to give a child a steady base of love, 2) to make a child taste fully the joy of accomplishment and 3) to teach a child to know what he is allowed to do.

B. Nobuyoshi Hirai's Book

In Hirai's book, he studies clowning and joking in young children and discusses the importance of these in developing a sense of humor. As a medical doctor and a family counselor, he deals with problems of such as school phobia. He has observed children clowning and joking for many years. He explains that although clowning and joking tend to be regarded as undesirable behavior in Japan, clowning and joking encourage the development of a sense of humor. Hirai believes that Japanese society needs to recognize the value of clowning and joking in young children. His study is unique because he analyzes the formation of personality together with the development of humor. He focuses on personality traits such as spontaneity and empathy, and discusses the relationship between these and sense of humor in the growth of young children.

V. Conclusion

In conclusion, there is a growing awareness that it is very important to foster a sense of humor in Japanese education. I would like to conclude with three reasons why humor in education is necessary in Japan. First of all, humor would help to relieve the stress of students and teachers. Since humor seems to enable a person to cope better with sources of conflict and distress, I feel it could help teachers and students to reduce their difficulties, anxiety, depression and stress.

Secondly as I mentioned before, humor is often defined as an ability to look at one thing from various ways which requires a flexible and playful frame of mind. Humor could help to encourage flexibility and creativity. Because of Japanese governmental control and its group-oriented culture, educational style is very uniform. If teachers understand the importance of humor and try to use it in the classroom, perhaps the class will become more enjoyable. Teachers may become approachable and develop more personal relationships with their students. Moreover, if teachers were given the opportunity, they might choose to develop curriculum that is both humorous and creative. Perhaps their teaching style would begin to meet the interests and needs of students. Furthermore, if the Ministry of Education, which is responsible for making curriculum and checking textbooks, realizes the value of humor in

NORIKO OKUDA

education, they would make decisions that would help to decrease the rigidity and uniformity in Japanese education.

Finally, humor may help to answer some of the problems in today's Japanese education. Nowadays, Japanese are starting to realize the lack of empathy and love in Japanese education. Since a student's value as an individual is likely to be judged by grades and the school he or she goes to, human-like qualities such as empathy are sometimes missing and human relationships are weakened. According to Alfons Deeken, a philosopher and anthropologist in Japan, humor is the most beautiful and concrete expression of love, because the purpose of using humor is to produce a joyous and warm atmosphere for the sake of others. Moreover, he and other humor researchers have insisted that humor will help smooth rigid human relationships. Therefore, using humor will help to put value on humanity, which I feel will be one of the important goals for Japan in the future.

These changes in education affect all people in Japanese society and ultimately affect Japanese relationships with other nations. I really believe if Japanese educators and people of other professions keep their eyes upon the value of humor, Japanese society will find a new way to reduce friction like the economical friction it now experiences with other countries. Furthermore, perhaps the Japanese will find a balance between maintaining their own cultural values and accepting some of the values of other nations.

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HUMOR, THE MISSING ELEMENT IN JAPANESE EDUCATION

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