

Giving Young People a Voice Through Project Work

—Hints for Japanese Schooling from the Singapore Model—

プロジェクトワークを通して若者の声を重視する
—シンガポールモデルから学べること—

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〈Abstract〉

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) states that children have rights, including the right to a voice and to an education which develops them fully, not only academically. However, it is argued that some Japanese students are deprived of such an education and, although achieving high results, are psychologically scarred due to excessive academic pressure combined with the lack of a “voice space”, adversely affecting their confidence. Student-centred project work in the Singaporean educational system is reviewed and it is concluded that Singapore could be a model case for Japan to follow as it would provide Japanese youth with a voice while relieving pressure and also allaying the fears of society that academic results would suffer because of time spent on projects.

〈Keywords〉

Japan education reform, youth voice, PBL, Singapore model

1 Introduction

The current generation of youth in Japan are in crisis. Nesser (2009) sees a crisis unique to Japan that has manifested itself as *hikkikomori* (acute social withdrawal). Miller (2012) identifies the crisis as being a psychologically-based one. Other problems include low social activity/civic engagement (Weathers, 2010), or apathy/passiveness (Gallardo and Aoki, 2012).

This paper argues that the crisis is, in fact, one of voice, and that the above problems are symptoms of that voice crisis. The example of Singapore, successful in providing a space for children’s voices through project work while maintaining a world-class economy and educational system, is then given. This Singapore model enables practice and participation through project based learning (PBL).

This paper fills a gap in the current body of research, which is the lack of focus on finding an acceptable method of providing Japanese youth with opportunities to develop their voice in education and, along with that, their

personality and future opportunities, as well as the economic future of the country, while satisfying the demands of society. Problems suffered by Japanese young people are discussed, a likely common cause (the lack of youth voice) is identified, and then steps toward finding a solution are proposed. It is argued that providing a space for such a voice does not necessarily have to result in reduced academic ability.

2 The situation in Singapore

2-1 The Singapore model of education

More than ever, education has become essential for the continued wellbeing of nations (Husbands, 2013). Singapore is an economic and educational success story in Asia (OECD, 2010) and it has outlined in simple terms the purpose and desired outcomes of education (DOE) in the country. The Singapore Ministry of Education (SMOE, 2010) states that a person who is schooled in the Singapore Education system will be:

- a confident person who has a strong sense of right and wrong, is adaptable and resilient, knows himself (sic), is discerning in judgment, thinks independently and critically, and communicates effectively;
- a self-directed learner who takes responsibility for his (sic) own learning, who questions, reflects and perseveres in the pursuit of learning;
- an active contributor who is able to work effectively in teams, exercises initiative, takes calculated risks, is innovative and strives for excellence;
- a concerned citizen who is rooted to Singapore, has a strong civic consciousness, is informed, and takes an active role in bettering the lives of others around him (sic).

This list requires skills gained not just by preparing for and passing examinations, but also by interacting with others (peers, teachers, etc.), by experience of both failure and success, and by expanding the child's worldview, i.e. empowering children to gain social skills and experience are an integral part of education. Bruner (1983) emphasises this, labelling education a social invention, and Borup et al. (2012) report that students view interaction as educational and motivational. Risk taking is included as an expected outcome of education and, although linked to an increased possibility of failure, is especially important for young people, being part of the "social psychological ecology of developing individuals" (Lightfoot, 1993, p.229). The Singapore model of education, aiming to develop the whole person, includes citizenship, personal confidence, self-direction and activeness, and is supported by Apple's observations that education is about "one's very *being*" (Apple, 2012, p.5), an idea also found in Lightfoot's (1993, p.241) description of the cultural construction of self as a "social-psychological construction that emerges from group life."

2-2 Singapore's project based learning and national success

Singapore's DOEs are social, personal and educational goals, supported by a government policy of student-centred project work. The SMOE states that all primary and secondary schools have project based learning (PBL) in their curricula (SMOE cited in Pearlman, 2009). The SMOE's expected learning outcomes for PBL are expressed in the four domains of Knowledge Application, Communication, Collaboration, and Independent Learning (SMOE 2013). These reflect the attributes stated in the

DOE (SMOE 2013), showing that properly carried out project work is expected to produce outcomes in line with those expected for a nation. Singapore's DOE show both economic and educational success and future promise (OECD, 2010), and have been borne out by Singapore's successful economy and educational success through the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results. Singapore is rated as one of the best performing education systems from the point of view of teachers (Barber and Mourshed, 2007), and the IMD World Competitiveness Yearbook (IMD, 2007) says that Singapore's education system best meets the future needs of a competitive economy.

Project work in Singapore is non-examinable and schools' choices of project and implementation are not government controlled; instead the schools are autonomous in this area, allowing them to choose a suitable approach (Pearlman, 2013). Furthermore, although project work is non-examinable (except just before tertiary education for those wishing to go to university as one of the university entry criteria, with PBL continued there), teachers do informally grade the work and pass results and comments back to students, which is a way of *formative assessment* (Dodge, 2013). This means there is three-way communication between teachers gaining feedback through seeing students' development and through project grading, students gaining feedback from their teachers, and student peers working together on a project.

Hattie (2009) identified effect sizes (how a technique advances student learning) which have a value of greater than 0.4 as being in the "zone of desired effects", with the highest effect size being about 1.2. Wiggins (2012) notes that feedback has greatest influence on learning, with an effect size of 1.13, while Hattie (2009) claims that feedback is most powerful when it is from student to teacher, supporting PBL.

Using PBL in Singaporean education has been a part of the success of educating the nation, serving as a method of feedback yet without the stress of being examined on such feedback, "plac(ing) value on equitable collaborations" (Jacquez et al., 2013, p.176) between students, their peers, and teachers within the school community. It is an empowering process for participants (Jacquez et al., 2013) and allows "students to control the resources that affect their lives" (Langhout and Thomas, 2010, p.61) due to students choosing and running the

projects. Despite time spent on these projects (or maybe because of it) Singapore has been able to maintain an extremely high PISA score.

3 The situation in Japan

3-1 Japan's educational system: an image of success

So, why hasn't Japan tried a similar method as the Singaporeans? After all, historically, the Japanese have taken the best systems of other countries (Hood, 2004), improved them, and successfully incorporated them (Cox, 2009). Singapore has also followed a path of initially importing knowledge and educational ideas from other countries, the West in particular, using it to create its own system (Lee, 2008).

Due to ideas being adopted from around the world, it should follow that international testing results in adopter country would be similar to those of countries from which ideas came. Like Singapore, Japan's results from the OECD's PISA (launched in 1997) show performance on the triennial tests in the three subjects tested (reading, mathematics and science) have consistently been statistically significantly above the OECD average (OECD, 2009). PISA has been adjusted to show the deeper learning capacity of students and their capacity to think critically, communicate effectively, take part in lifelong learning, and work in collaboration with others (Brown et al., 2011). Japan is in the top ten of the world for all subjects, with Singapore scoring even higher than Japan in every category. Clearly, Japan's (and Singapore's) way of adopting modern foreign education policy and practice brought greater educational success than the countries from which they were adopted. Note neither France, Germany, Britain nor the United States feature in the top ten for any category.

3-2 Japan's education system in crisis

So, there is no problem currently with education in Japan, it seems. Well, that is just what PISA figures hide. In fact, Japanese education has been in crisis for a long time and may need to look again at what it can learn from outside in order to fix it. The crisis is the silencing of/lack of support for young people's voice in the school system.

Despite consistently scoring extremely well on international testing such as PISA and IEA (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement), the Japanese educational system and its

students suffer from many problems (Saito, 2011). The Japanese focus on examinations results in the inhibition of a spirit of inquiry and creative thinking (Saito, 2011), contrary to what PISA claims a high result shows (Brown et al., 2011). This is commonly known in the media as "examination hell" (Tsukada, 2010, p.69), and comes from excessive competition to gain a place at desired schools, with academic competition existing even at preschool entrance level (Tsukada, 2010). Problems include students having to attend evening cram schools to keep up with the pace of classwork, students who eventually become *futouko* (psychologically unable to go to school), teacher/student violence, *ijime* (bullying), low social activity and civic engagement (Allison, 2009), (Weathers, 2010) and apathy (Saito, 2011) (Gallardo and Aoki, 2012). (Words in Japanese indicate a specific context.)

3-3 A solution to the problems faced by Japanese youth?

It appears a solution could be to return to borrowing methods from abroad, but this time to use lessons learned from PBL adopting the Singaporean method of education. If the Singapore "brand" is used, it could allay concerns of parents and academics regarding a drop in educational standards, and would also give students a voice through project work, while reducing the examination burden by providing a non-examinable space. Due to this, the Japanese may give such educational reform time to show results. A method such as that used in Singapore could improve the confidence of Japanese youth and give them individuality and a true *ikiru chikara* (zest for life), resulting in decreasing *ijime* and/or its effects, *hikkikomori*, and other problems, while reducing adult resistance. Sono (cited in Hoffman, 2013) claims that "individuality always triumphs" and that "we need to make strong people." Self-esteem has been indicated as lacking among Japanese school-age children, and such a lack has been connected with social problems (Hoffman, 2013), showing the potential impact of encouraging child-led research in Japan.

4 Conclusion

The introduction began with a bleak picture of the situation of young people in Japanese education, and identified their lack of voice as being at the core of the crisis, with problems such as social withdrawal, bullying, apathy being the symptoms.

An argument is made for adopting elements of the Singapore model, due to its successful pursuance of its DOE which include the needs of individuals and the nation to succeed, its inclusion of PBL to achieve those DOE, and also because of the economic and educational success of Singapore. Furthermore, Singapore provides a closer-to-

home Asian model from which Japan can learn. The model allows includes three-way feedback (teacher-student-peers). The research reveals a way for Japan to successfully reform its education system in a way satisfactory to all interested parties.

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