

Schools plus rules equals Japan minus two

[Colin P.A. Jones](#) Mar 11, 2018



ISTOCK

Two years ago, I was driving my family back from a weekend trip to Wilmington, North Carolina. With my wife and younger daughter sleeping in the back, my older daughter sat in the front fighting motion sickness and, as it turned out, sadness.

As we drove into the dusk, she started to cry. She didn't want to go back to Japan — didn't want to go back to *school* in Japan, at least. It was a long drive with plenty of time to talk. Just 8 years old, she could nevertheless articulate a compelling case.

I was teaching Japanese business law as a visiting professor at Duke University. The six-week course entailed a long enough stay to bring my family. Our girls attended a small private school that took short-term students.

It seemed a good way to have them experience an English-language, Western learning environment. We had done the same the previous year and they enjoyed it greatly. Every day they eagerly went to school and came back with synapses almost visibly flashing from stimulation — something we rarely saw in Japan.

As someone who studies rules — legal and otherwise — I am interested in the attitude many Japanese people have towards them. When my daughter started attending the neighborhood public school in Kyoto in 2014, I thought I would get some near-first-hand insights into the process by which educational policy manages to put at least some Japanese into boxes of passive obedience from an early age. The surprise was how well-prepped many kids already seemed before that process even began.

Many rules, too few reasons

In the early days, her biggest source of stress was actually classmates constantly telling her “Do this/Don’t do that.” This was before teachers had made their mark, so it seemed to reflect input those kids got at home. Perhaps to them, people just naturally interacted through a constant stream of commands and complaints — by announcing rules, most inexplicable but pronounced with great authority.

Schools need rules, of course, but those at our school seemed to compound the problem. Students had to follow dozens of rules — too many for even the teachers enforce consistently, let alone the children to remember. Some were mystifying, others complex: no drinking water on the way home from school; climbing to the third level of the monkey bars permitted during PE class but not during recess, when first graders weren’t even allowed on the school field.

SCHOOL RULES.

Some rules sought uniformity and curricular submission. The “convoy method” of regulation ruled, with everyone moving at the speed of the slowest ship. Children who could already write their names in kanji or katakana were not allowed to: Those scripts hadn’t been “learned” yet. What kids could have on their desks in class was strictly regulated; anything that might result in unapproved stimuli or learning was forbidden.

It was mandatory to eat the school-provided lunch completely. Forcing kids to eat a variety of things made from local produce may have some merits, and I’m certainly too lazy to cram pickled okra down young throats at dinnertime myself.

On some days, however, just knowing the hated *nishin nasu* (an eggplant dish) was on the menu was enough to make daughter No. 1 want to stay home. Once, she saw a classmate forced to eat ramen and milk until he vomited. In second grade they had “*mogu mogu* time,” when teachers with timers made the children eat as quickly as possible in 15 minutes, in silence — no laughing or talking to friends.

For *undōkai* (sports days), children endlessly practiced dance routines for the entertainment of their parents. These events also involved seemingly pointless, vaguely militaristic rituals: passing the flag of last year’s event and chanting oaths to *ganbaru* (try hard). School shows involved children parroting the well-intentioned, utterly predictable pablum that adults sitting in committees apparently want to hear.

The rules may not have made sense to the children, but they clearly seemed to be a source of stress. Small wonder if some might stop asking what should be their favorite question, the one that should make learning fun and meaningful: Why?

Perhaps that was the point. “Why?” can be a bothersome question,

particularly when asked about rules. Public schools have to accept all-comers, and making classrooms full of small primates easier to manage is understandably part of their agenda. Our local school's approach, however, seemed too focused on developing children with a high tolerance for boredom.

At our first parent participation day, we saw how tedious the process of learning simple addition was rendered — how *stupid* the children were assumed to be. When the first-grade teacher visited our home a few weeks later (the practice in Japan), we asked how we could guide our child in getting through the dull bits. Her answer was essentially that it was part of the learning objective to get good at sitting quietly and listening — to be *well-behaved* while bored. She also muttered about her school's policies involving some *seishinron*, the mind-over-matter, logic-free mentality that was supposed to bring Japan victory in the war (but didn't). Getting children to sit still and listen by stimulating their curiosity did not seem to be an option.

On the positive side, other than a predictable level of “Hey, you're a ‘half’ — speak some English” teasing, there was no outright bullying, no cruel teachers. Pretty much everyone was superficially nice, and mutual respect was inculcated as a value from day one. In fact, it was bullying in much smaller classes, foreign teachers who seemed incapable of noticing let alone dealing with it and a terrible tuition-to-quality ratio that quickly made the local international school a nonoption.

Unapologetically subjective

My daughters' experience might be unrepresentative. Perhaps it was just the school, or Kyoto; the city is quirkily rigid in numerous petty ways. But many things clearly reflected national policy: the school lunches, the curriculum and the third-grade moral education textbook featuring children forming a committee to petition the principal to allow them to use the swings again (after proposing suitable rules, of course) and a Western-

named boy invoicing his mother (in cents) for doing his chores. Such things must mystify third-graders, who don't know how invoicing works and have never seen anything as fun as a swing in a public schoolyard.

Perhaps there were other options. From what I have heard from people whose children attend other private schools in Japan, it sounds like they involve the same basic dynamic as public schools but with more homework and expensive kit. The university where I teach has affiliated schools running from kindergarten to high school. It may be great, but I consciously chose to avoid the potential conflict of being both an employee and a fee-paying parent at the same institution. Anyway, childhood being a finite resource, there are only so many options we can try.

Japanese school defenders will probably dislike the subjective, anecdotal nature of my criticism, and perhaps proffer test scores and other data showing how well Japan's students perform in international comparisons. But empirical data is what you use to convince other people what to put up with. You raise your children the way they live: subjectively.

My daughters have a good basis for comparison. My itinerant academic life means they have experienced schools in Canada, England, the U.S. mainland and Guam, as well as Japan. In their personal rankings, Japan comes at the bottom.

Mine too. Language was never the issue, at least in the early years. Whether in Japanese or English, for us the important thing about school was for the children to be happy, engaged and learning to think. We saw a palpable lack of this in too much of their Japanese educational experiences.

By third grade, the subject on the lips of my daughter's classmates turned to *juken*; which middle school entrance exam they would take. For many this meant *juku* (cram schools) and mastering the art of cracking questions with known answers. Anything subjective like essays required becoming skilled at Writing What Adults Like.

It seemed that life became a closed system where anything lacking a preordained answer should be excluded or ignored. Very early on, fun and learning separate into different things to be pursued at different, allotted times.

Unfortunately, tests can't quantify happiness, measure stimulation or rank budding imaginations. Anyone wanting to talk about fostering innovation and creativity in Japan should drop by a public school and see them slowly strangled in the crib by tedium and rules.

People wondering why Japanese are having fewer children might reflect on whether it is a place where *children* would choose to be children, are *allowed* to be children — where enough adults have happy memories of their own childhoods that they want to replicate for a next generation. For my part, I have some insights into why many the Japanese seem particularly tolerant of laws that don't make sense; like rain falling from the sky, they are showered with such rules from any early age.

More subjectivity, I know, but for my daughters there is no doubt. With me on sabbatical in Guam and them finally full-time at the school they have attended seasonally for years, they are happy and stimulated. Smiling when they go to school, they are still smiling when they come home.

Dinner conversations frequently become therapy sessions about school in Japan. At the end of my sabbatical they will almost certainly stay here. Still loving the country of their birth, they will doubtless go back for visits. But Japan appears to have lost two more children, probably permanently.

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