Education for Living: Human Rights Education for Social Interdependence

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What can a school do to prevent sad lives? This question lays the foundation for the creation of a human rights education-centered program called "Education for Living" at a school in Osaka, Japan. This paper undertakes an inquiry into this specific human rights education program to deepen the understanding of how human rights education is actualized by educators in Japan.

The "Education for Living" program stands out as distinctive for its broader goals of interdependence (here understood as the fundamental connectedness of human beings to each other) by emphasizing a holistic, interdisciplinary approach that promotes horizontal connections between people, empathy, compassion and the building of relationships. Although there is no one single approach to implementing human rights education in Japan, this case study makes recognizable certain practices, rooted in Japanese culture and social habits, that may foster in educators the ability to contemplate alternative understandings of human rights education. As such, this paper dialogues with various human rights education models across Asia and the world, while stressing the need to account for and understand local contexts, cultures, and traditions in educational models.

Introduction

Insofar as the "Education for Living" program is deeply rooted in local traditions and cultural practices, it also contributes to the broader global conversation on human rights education. I argue that localized approaches can offer valuable solutions to challenges faced on a global scale.

Addressing the pressing global challenges that are collectively faced requires urgent and effective action. Many leaders, politicians, and intellectuals have made significant commitments to promoting human rights frame-

works as the most effective path to achieving peace. Countries worldwide have adopted progressive human rights discourse, identifying education as a human right while also integrating human rights education into school curriculum (Choi, 2024; Hafner-Burton & Tsutsui, 2005; Suarez 2007a, 2007b). Human rights education programs across the globe are tasked with building a consciousness of *universal* human rights that, "are *inherent* [emphasis added] to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status" (UN, 2021). Governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), schools, and teachers have introduced human rights education into their classrooms with the stated intention of creating a more equitable and peaceful world where human dignity is respected, and abusive powers are held accountable.

The global adoption of human rights frameworks has not only shaped educational systems but also played a crucial role in inspiring and catalyzing transformative movements across diverse societies. Increased awareness of human rights through formal and informal education has impacted and catalyzed social transformation projects and movements. These include the downfall of apartheid in South Africa, bans on female genital mutilation, racial injustice movements, the abolishment of the death penalty, and others (Tsutsui, 2017). Global human rights have also enhanced the overall level of activism at the micro-local level (Bajaj, 2017; Tai, 2010; Tsutsui, 2017; Ramirez, et al., 2007). By attaching local struggles to internationally accepted frameworks, home-grown movements have been able to gain credibility, attention, and momentum. The universal principles bestowed upon a human rights framework has been accessed and leveraged by disadvantaged groups around the globe to promote the protection of their rights. Human rights-based arguments have a record of giving voice, legitimacy, and solidarity to groups whose rights are violated.

However, human rights frameworks have demonstrated limitations in addressing some of the world's most critical challenges. Suffering continues in regions like Gaza and Ukraine, as well as among racial, ethnic and sexual minority populations world-wide, together with the ongoing prevalence of state-sponsored death penalties in many countries. Moreover, these frameworks have yet to fully grapple with planetary survivability concerns, as climate-related crises escalate globally, affecting both human rights and the future of life on Earth. A more pluralistic understanding of human rights education can open new possibilities for addressing issues that cur-

rent frameworks struggle to resolve. While human rights frameworks have made significant achievements, there remain areas they either fail to address or even worse, exacerbate. Some critiques contend that these frameworks contribute to issues such as the atomization of individuals (Zembylas & Papamichael, 2017), human rights inflation (Deleuze, 1995, Miyamoto, et al. 2024), and the division of the human from nature (Motokawa, 1989, Rappleye, et al. 2024, Rappleye, 2024). This paper presents an approach to human rights education that can offer onto-epistemological perspectives on the issue of human rights that promotes the emergence of alternative, novel takes on contemporary pressing issues. This analysis centers exclusively on the human rights education practices within one particular school, illustrating how its unique context shapes the way teachers are helping students tackle the challenges they face. By focusing on this specific program, I hope to highlight general phenomenon in Japan's approach to human rights education, as emerged in this particular situational context.

This paper explores potentially divergent ontological and epistemological themes found through the use of a case study of one school's use of human rights education. To accomplish this, first, I will position my article by emphasizing the importance of recognizing positive contributions within human rights education. I then trace the historical development of human rights education in Japan, briefly outlining its evolution and the socio-historical contexts that have shaped its trajectory. This will provide context and insights into what contemporary human rights education may look like in Japan. Next, I will engage with critiques of human rights education in Japan to highlight concerns raised by academics regarding its purpose and success. Next, I will frame my discussion by establishing a conceptual framework grounded in ontological understandings of interdependence to guide my analysis of human rights education practices in Japan.

Central to this exploration is a case study of the "Education for Living" program, focusing on the school that developed this initiative. I will then explore the background of the program's creation, the motivations behind its implementation, and the core tenets that define its approach to human rights education. By examining these elements, I aim to provide a nuanced understanding of how human rights education is conceived and practiced in this specific context. Finally, I will reflect on the broader implications of these findings for understanding global discourse on human rights education, considering how localized practices in Japan can inform and enrich

international conversations about human rights education. Through this structured analysis, I hope to contribute to deeper appreciation of human rights education's potential to foster positive social change while addressing the criticism it faces.

Significance of Human Rights Education in Global Educational Debates

This study examines a case study of human rights education at a combined primary and lower secondary school in Japan which aims to overcome "disorderly behavior" and other issues by strengthening human rights education through a transdisciplinary and school-wide "Education for Living" program. It investigates how school stakeholders – teachers, administration, Parents-Teachers Association (PTA), school staff, child social service staff, university researchers, lawyers and other relevant actors address problems found in their school by centering on horizontal relationships between people.

This paper has the explicit purpose of providing an update on human rights education in Japan by providing visibility to the lived experience and condition of the human rights education teachers, as well as the discourses and educational knowledge they produce. Steiner-Khamsi (2000) argues that scholars "must direct our attention to agencies, resisting, inverting or indigenizing education imports" (page 158). With human rights education in Japan launching less than twenty years ago, there is a dearth of research focusing on human rights education implementation and recontextualization within the country. This research is particularly relevant given the global debates around the increasing influence and participation of global education governance in schooling practices (Edwards, 2021, Takayama, 2017, Verger et al, 2017). Japan is a particularly understudied area within the human rights education literature, despite being an early adopter of human rights education and having non-western ontological foundations.

Teachers at Tajima Minami School in Osaka, Japan have utilized collective strength to solve local problems by forgoing their own path, escaping "petrified" ready-made forms to reinvent human rights education in a way that meets the specific needs of their students. While this study offers valuable insights into the application of human rights education within the boundaries of this case study, understanding the full significance of this approach requires a deeper theoretical explanation.

Reparative Reading of Human Rights Education in Japan: Highlighting Positive Contributions

This study engages in a "reparative reading" through a constructive critique of human rights education in Japan by utilizing Sedgwick's reparative approach (1997). Although this study may call attention to some ways in which human rights education in Japan may be problematic, rather than a critique of human rights education in Japan in of itself, this study's contribution is to show what one Japanese school does well. In this way, conducting research through a reparative position allows the researcher to work with various human rights education stakeholders to find "good surprises" in their own terms. By highlighting potential positives found through a case study on one school, the intention is not to defend the status quo and dominant power structures within Japan. Rather, it showcases positive contributions that can empower and establish new baselines in understanding human rights education both regionally and globally.

Historical Context and the Development of Human Rights Education in Japan

Human rights discourses and educational practice in Japan are uniquely shaped by the influences of cultural, political, economic, historical, and social realities. Scholars acknowledge the problematic nature and difficulty of understanding the concept of human rights in Japan without considering its varying historical and social developments, cultures, and traditions. (Hirano, 2020; Meyer, 2020; Takeda, 2012). Bajaj (2012) notes that with the relatively short history of human rights education, definitions of human rights education are often malleable, and highly contextual to location and time. The same can be said of Japan, where human rights education first gained official recognition in the last two decades. I hope to showcase how Japan's human rights education offers insights into how interdependent concepts of self influence general understandings of human rights and the envisaged goals human rights education more generally.

The notion of human rights was first introduced to Japan from the West in the late nineteenth century. Just as the West worked out the meanings of "rights" and "human" with their entrance into nation-statehood, Japan needed to define the citizen in this new model. Yukichi Fukuzawa was one of

the most influential intellectuals during this period of nation-building. He found the translation of Western concepts particularly challenging (Takeda, 2012). This included the development of the term *kenri* (rights) and distinctions between *minken* (people's rights), *jinken* (human rights), and *kokken* (state's rights). Facing domestic political competition and foreign pressures, the Meiji government chose *minken* to represent individual rights granted by the government and, crucially, through the relationship with the emperor as a living god (Takeda, 2012). By 1947, Article 11 of the newly written Constitution of Japan guaranteed fundamental human rights to the people as eternal and inviolate rights. This made Japan one of the first countries in the world to galvanize human rights in their constitution.

Following the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993, the United Nations adopted the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education in the following year (1994). In 1996, prior to the adoption of the Plan of Action for the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education (1995–2004) [1], Japan took several steps supporting human rights education. The Japanese government rapidly created the Head Office for the Promotion of the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education within the Cabinet in 1995. In 1996, the government enacted the *Jinken Yōgo Shisaku Suishin Hō*, or the Law for the Promotion of Human Rights Protection Policies (MOFA, 2015; Takeda, 2012). These new policies allowed for the implementation of human rights education teaching in schools, beginning in the mid-1990s. The Cabinet also decided in 1996 to reconstruct a set of home-grown social justice education programs called *Dōwa Kyōiku*. The focus of these educational policies, originally aimed at addressing discrimination and promoting the social integration of the historically marginalized Burakumin group, was incorporated into the broader agenda of human rights education. Human rights education then reflected not only what was recommended by the Plan of Action for the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education, but also both the influences of *Dōwa* and moral education classes. The stated purpose of the plan was the comprehensive and systematic advancement of human rights education and human rights promotion.

In its current form, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) delegates most decision making on human rights education to the Board of Education (BOE). MEXT (2023) states in the basic plan to promote human rights education, "Promote correction and enhancement of human rights education activities at boards of educa-

tion and schools by preparing and disseminating reference materials based on recent trends, etc., conducting surveys and research, and disseminating their outcomes" (page 56). Human rights education is not currently a mandatory stand-alone subject in Japanese schools. Instead, human rights education is integrated across various subjects, such as social studies, civics, and most notably in moral education classes. It is also promoted through a range of extracurricular activities like essay, poster, poetry and speech contests, fields trips, human rights festivals and special programming during human rights week in December. Since the 2015 moral education reforms, moral education has been reintroduced as a formal subject in the national curriculum. Although schools continue to allocate moral education time for lessons on human rights, the subject now faces increased competition with other content for instructional time (Bamkin, 2024).

Human rights education in Japan is regularly linked with anti-bullying programs, which offers schools some direction in determining how extensively it is taught and what specific content is covered (MEXT, 2023). This decentralized approach leaves significant discretion to individual schools. Most of the guidance and encouragement for human rights education initiatives comes from municipal and prefectural boards of education, rather than a top-down national mandate. This system generally allows schools to adapt their human rights programming to local contexts but also results in varying levels of implementation across the country. In the following section, I position my research within the broader academic conversation surrounding human rights education in Japan.

Is Japan's Human Rights Education in Crisis? Reviews from the Field

Assessments of human rights education in Japan frequently focus on two major issues. First, scholars argue that there is an overemphasis on the moral and philosophical aspects of human rights rather than on the legal frameworks and structures that uphold these rights (Fujita, 2022; Ushitora & Akuzawa, 2023). The use of *omoiyari* (compassion) is criticized (Fujita, 2022; Takeda, 2012), claiming it can create hierarchical relationships between the "giver" and "receiver," reinforcing unequal dynamics or that it dilutes the responsibility of the state to guarantee human rights (Kikuchi, 2024). Second, critics assert that human rights education in Japan often prioritizes local issues, such as those related to *Burakumin* discrimination, over

addressing broader, universal human rights frameworks (Takamatsu, 2024). Additionally, it is asserted that Japan's human rights education lacks alignment with Western rights-based models that emphasize individual rights and legal protections, lacking a combative side where citizens learn how to demand their human rights through a variety of mechanisms. However, I argue that these critiques may stem from viewing Japan's culturally influenced differences in human rights education as deficiencies rather than as alternative approaches. For example, as will be discussed further in this paper, Tajima Minami uses compassion and relationship-building to foster interconnectedness and collective responsibility. This contrasts with the Western Enlightenment-influenced emphasis on individualness and separateness, reflecting deeper cultural differences in the interpretation of human rights. By focusing on relationships and connections, care, and interdependence, Japan's human rights education fosters a community-centered approach to human rights education that aims to build solidarity and shared responsibility as a foundation for social justice (Kitayama & Hashizaki, 2018).

Takeda (2012) gets to the heart of the matter when stating that while, "norms of Japanese people's behaviour are formed by duties and obligations, individualistic ideas of human rights may face enormous difficulties in being accepted in society" (page 19). This observation remains relevant today. Supporters of human rights education must acknowledge the ontological implications of prioritizing western outlooks over Japanese perspectives. Although both parties share the same goal in the alleviation of human suffering, their approaches are undergirded in different understandings of the self.

It is also important to mention how crisis language is often employed to advocate for a future aligned with specific political goals. Those who use crisis language often first target education systems as a perceived means to implement change aligned with their political interests. "Crisis" in educational debate has been shown as a global trend, with Japan experiencing the phenomenon in reactions to *yutori kyōiku* (relaxed education) and *yomigaere nihon* (Revive Japan) (Takayama, 2007). In the context of these global debates, the presentation of Western ideas as the solutions to educational crisis contributes to homogenization of education knowledge.

Finally, important for this case study is an understanding of the relationship to power structures within human rights education, as this will help position human rights education at Tajima Minami in later analy-

sis. The power and influence of global human rights discourse are closely linked to a group's proximity to central authority. At the classroom level, Bajaj (2012) found that the distance from power may serve as a key indicator of a human rights education program's ideological orientation through a comparative case study in India. As illustrated in Figure 1, locations that are physically or metaphorically closer to power structures tend to use human rights discourse to maintain the status quo while framing human rights as shared morals through the lens of global citizenship. This perspective aids in understanding the nature of human rights education at Tajima Minami. Tajima Minami's peripheral position provides a unique case study within Japan that not only challenges the prevailing assumptions about human rights education but also disrupts existing uneven power relations in the country (Takayama, 2020).

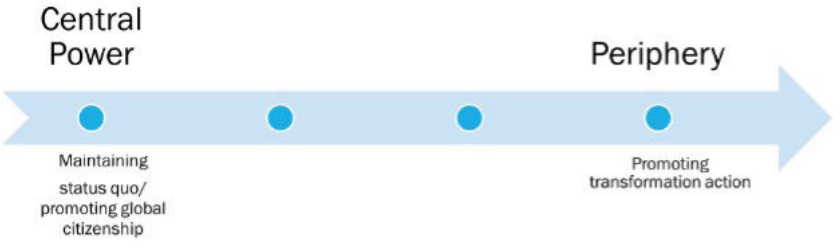

Figure 1. Power Dynamics in Human Rights Education

Conceptual Framework – The Interdependent "Human" in Human Rights

Let's return to the opening line of this article. What can a school do to prevent sad lives? For teachers at Tajima Minami, the answer lies in creating a school atmosphere grounded in human rights education. Understanding how teachers intend to do this requires a closer examination of their core objectives, helping students to live happy lives. Happiness, as a concept, is inherently context dependent. "In Japan, the empirically observed, dominant predictors of a happy person are an orientation toward relationships, a sense of fitting in, relational attunement, and social support" (Uchida & Rappleye, 2024, page 72). Moreover, Uchida and Rappleye (2024) assert that happiness indicators based on WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic) cultural frameworks fail to account for alternative cultural conceptions of happiness to be recognized. Ranking measures often

reflect values associated with individualism, such as a strong sense of pride, the ability to stand out, having high self-esteem, self-respect and high income (Uchida & Rappleye, 2024). They argue that the culturally mismatched measurement criteria may be able to better explain Japan's relatively low position on global happiness and life satisfaction rankings. In East Asia, the most consistent indicators of happiness are linked the realization of social harmony and relational attunement (Uchida & Rappleye, 2024, page 74). Further, empirical research has shown that in East Asian contexts, social harmony is a more reliable predictor of happiness in East than self-esteem (Endo, 1995; Kitayama & Markus, 2000). When considering members of a culture as a whole, interdependent tendencies and patterns may emerge (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Importantly, the purpose here is not to homogenize members of a cultural group or overlook differences within that group, but rather to illustrate how supposedly neutral expectations are often shaped by distinctly Western cultural values. Framing Tajima Minami's approach within this interdependent framework is essential for a deeper exploration of their human rights education program later. This contextualization allows us to better understand how the school's initiatives both reflect and challenge cultural assumptions about the "human" in human rights education.

What does an interdependent mode entail? In essence, and given space limitations, it refers to how people in certain cultures view themselves as deeply connected to others. Rather than seeing oneself as independent individual, people in interdependent cultures prioritize being in tune with one's surroundings, their relationships and roles within families, communities, and social groups (Kasulis, 2002).

In examining how individuals engage in conscious reflection, a profound sense of belonging within social relationships emerges as a fundamental aspect. From this perspective, the relationship itself becomes the primary unit of conscious reflection, stressing the interconnectedness of individuals within their social contexts (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). These fundamental connections are based not only on the relationship between oneself and others, but also between everyone and everything. Consequently, a primary imperative of interdependent culture is to actively sustain and nurture this interdependence as vital for both individual and collective well-being. Lebra (1976) suggests that in Japanese society, individuals reach their fullest expression of humanity through their relationships with others. Understanding this conceptual framework is crucial for comprehend-

ing how human rights education is taught at Tajima Minami, as it shapes the approach to fostering relationships and cultivating a nurturing learning environment.

The ability to investigate the underlying developments towards an orientation centered on individualism between the West and Japan (East Asia) in greater depth is further limited by the length of this article. However, a simple example of difference can be given by looking at the way one addresses oneself. "I" is used in the English to refer to oneself, where as in Japan``自分" or *jibun* is common. The Chinese characters of *jibun* literally means "one part of a whole." The Japanese self is formed through matrices of relations to others, and happiness is understood through one's different self's attunement with one's surroundings (Kasulis, 2002; Uchida & Rappleye, 2024). If the individual (and individual rights) is indeed central to the human rights project, the divergence in the concept of self in Japan poses significant cultural challenges for implementation and acceptance of paradigmatic Western human rights within Japanese society.

Case Study: "Education for Living" Program

The case study format allows the research to highlight general phenomenon through a particular situational context, as it exists within the boundaries of one human rights education program. The "Education for Living" program has garnered a significant amount of attention from both popular media (Okubo, 2023) and through a book series (See Figure 2. *Ikuno Minami Elementary School, Educational Practice Series* 1-4, 2022-2024) written by school staff in collaboration with educational scholars from universities in Japan. This research relies on document review and includes translations directly from the book series, school website or other locations. Since the scholarship presented in the *Ikuno Minami Elementary School Educational Practice Series* volumes are written in Japanese for a Japanese audience, it becomes virtually invisible to international English-language scholarship due to its linguistic inaccessibility (Yonezawa, et al., 2018). By bringing Japanese-language scholarship into dialogue with the international human rights education stakeholders through this English-language publication, these differences illustrate "how the process of learning about others can unsettle our existing horizon of knowing and result in a process of unlearning and relearning" (Takayama, 2020, page 62). Finally, as this educational

practice series is written in Japanese for a Japanese readership, it can be assumed that it is situated within domestic policy debates about human rights education in Japan.

Figure 2. Ikuno Minami Elementary School, Educational Practice Series 1-4, 2022-2024

From left to right, the titles of the books in Figure 2 are Vol. 1: *"Education for Living": Develop self-esteem and learn how to value yourself and others*; Vol. 2: *Nurturing the Mind: Japanese Language Education: Developing the "power of words" in small steps*; Vol. 3: *Creating Schools that Make Children's Lives Brighter; Trauma-informed education* and Vol. 4: *Education for Living Complete Lesson Plan Collection: A nine-year educational program that guarantees "safety, security and love."* This study was also foregrounded by approximately ten visits to the school over the past year, including participation in two large-scale open school events highlighting the "Education for Living" program.

Finally, as the school documents and quotes utilized come from already publicly published books, websites, and media sources, the school's name and teacher names will not be anonymized. In the following section, I briefly introduce several aspects of the "Education for Living" program that offer fruitful areas of inquiry.

The School and Program Background

Tajima Minami School, formerly known as "Ikuno Minami," is a municipal combined primary and lower secondary school in Ikuno Ward, Osaka, Japan. In 2022, previously separate primary and lower secondary schools were fully merged, creating a continuous educational environment for students from 1st through 9th grade. This structure is unique compared to the

typical primary "1-6" and lower secondary school "1-3" designations found elsewhere in Japan. The continuity in school environment over the course of nine years is one of the school's strengths, particularly regarding its human rights education program. The extended timeline allows for greater depth and continuity in students' learning, as teachers collaboratively plan and align the human rights education curriculum across the entire period of 1st through 9th grade compulsory education.

Ikuno ward is distinguished by its high population of residents with foreign roots, accounting for 21.6 percent of the ward's population in 2017 (Ono et. al, 2024). Within this foreign population, a significant proportion consists of Korean-Japan residents, who make up approximately 75 percent of the foreigner demographic. Additionally, around 10 percent of students at Tajima Minami School come from local child welfare facilities.

The "Education for Living" program at Tajima Minami School is notable for its interdisciplinary approach and its responsiveness to the specific needs of the student population. The program's curriculum has been developed over time and draws language from fields such as medicine, psychology, welfare studies, and law, reflecting the broad range of issues addressed. See Figure 3 to better understand the historical development of the program over the course of several years. Teachers at the school are actively involved in identifying and addressing the unique challenges faced by their students,

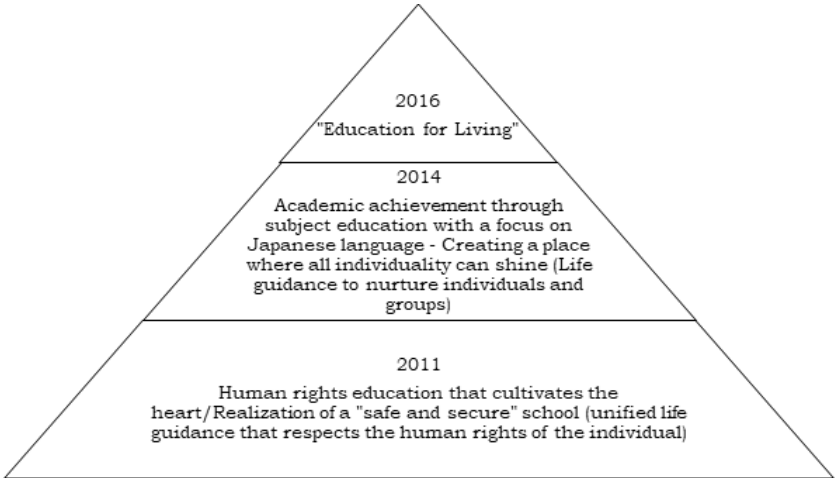

Figure 3. Historical Development of "Education for Living" Program (translated from Ono et al., 2024, p 16.) overview of the chronological order in which the school improved its curriculum.

demonstrating their acute awareness of their students' needs. For example, they frequently consult external experts, purchase relevant materials, and engage in ongoing professional development to deepen their understanding and improve their teaching practices (Osaka Municipal Tajima Minami Elementary School and Tajima Junior High School, 2022).

The implementation of the "Education for Living" program has had a significant impact on student behavior over the past decade. One teacher explains that in 2011, the school faced numerous incidents of violent and disruptive behavior, including physical aggressions, theft, and defiance of authority. These behaviors were notably severe, with instances of students physically attacking each other where in a moment, "as hitting someone in the temple with the speed of a professional boxer, kneeing them in the solar plexus the moment they crouched, grabbing the hair of a staggering opponent and slamming their forehead into the wall, and straddling them while they were down and beating them up" (Saimura, et al., 2022, page 10). However, consistent application of human rights education, along with focused research on Japanese language education and efforts to promote students' academic achievement, has led to a marked improvement in behavior. Today, the school remains committed to providing opportunities for each child to shine in their daily lives and events. While recognizing that they cannot fully eliminate the challenges rooted in broader social backgrounds, the school continues to support students in navigating these difficulties.

Human Rights Education Curriculum

> Bringing a breath of justice into an uncomfortable space where fear could not be completely wiped away was the first step in full-scale human rights education. (Ono, et al., 2024, page 76).

To examine the implementation of the "Education for Living" program at Tajima Minami, I will explore its practical integration within the school. Due to space constraints, this article will not provide an exhaustive description of the entire curriculum. However, I have selected a number of examples to draw attention to how interdependence is integrated into the curriculum and have also translated several figures that present a macro-level overview of Tajima Minami's human rights education program guiding points and goals, as they try to provide a "meaningful learning experience for all children, not just those who have experienced adversity" (Saimura, et al., 2022, page 16).

Table 1. Guiding Steps of Human Rights Education Lessons at Tajima Minami [emphasis added by author] (Ono, et al., 2024, page 78).

Guiding Steps for Human Rights Education Lessons
1. Learn the **facts of discrimination** through **step-by-step** learning.
2. Be able to **distinguish between facts and prejudice** by knowing correctly.
3. **Recognize and respect "differences"** after knowing the facts (history and culture).
4. Discuss **ways to eliminate discriminatory feelings**, not **allow them to occur**, or not **show them in words and actions**, from a problem-solving perspective.

The guiding steps for human rights education lessons in Table 1 provide a structured framework for fostering students' understanding of human rights issues. Teachers emphasize that the sequence of these steps is crucial in helping to bring delicate and timely issues to the surface as human rights concerns. This structured approach allows these concerns to be addressed within an educational context, helping students understand and confront them.

While there is a great deal of variation in the content covered over the course of nine years of the "Education for Living" program, the consistently emphasized goals include: 1) learning how to maintain an appropriate distance so as not to fall into domination or dependency, 2) acquiring the ability to receive help from the right people when in trouble, and 3) forming an identity based on the hope that even if the past cannot be changed, the future can be created. (Osaka Municipal Tajima Minami Elementary School and Tajima Junior High School, page 10). This approach focuses on incremental progress, emphasizing the importance of taking small steps in the learning process. Tajima Minami also established its "8 Pillars of Human Rights Education" based on this school's specific needs. The interdisciplinary breadth of human rights education in the "Education for Living" program can be seen in the goals presented below in Table 2. Emphasis was added to sections to highlight the blanket character of interdependence in the framework.

Table 2. Goals of the "8 Pillars" of Human Rights Education [emphasis added by author] (Translated from Ono, et al., 2024, page 78).

Pillars	Goals
"Education for Living"	To enable everyone to live a safe and secure life, fostering the **ability to care** for **one's own and others'** minds and bodies, learn the knowledge necessary for life, and think about the **connections and distances between people**.
Education for Foreigners living in Japan	In particular, the program aims to learn about the **connection** between the Korean Peninsula and Ikuno Ward, Japan, and to foster a deeper understanding of the region. The program also focuses on the practice of calling people's (real) names and presenting them in practice.
Peace Education	Learn about the history of wars that have occurred in Japan and around the world, as well as the lives, thoughts, and family ties of the people. Also, consider how to **understand each other's positions and maintain a state of peace**.
International Understanding Education	To develop a broad perspective, to **understand** and **respect different cultures** from various countries, and to develop the ability to **live together** with them.
Sex Education (Gender Coexistence Education)	By getting to know one's own body, keeping it clean, and caring for it, one will develop the ability to maintain their health. **Cultivate hearts** with the ability to **care** for one's **own body** as well as the **bodies of your friends**.
Education for Understanding People with Disabilities	Deepen knowledge and understanding of disabilities. Within the class, homeroom teachers will act as intermediaries and work **to build good relationships** between those students with and without disabilities.
Dōwa Education	Learn about the facts of **Buraku** discrimination throughout Japanese history, become aware of its **irrationality**, and develop one's own opinion.
Community Learning	By carrying out learning activities related to the **local area** appropriate to each grade level, students will learn about the area where they were born and raised, develop a sense of cherishing it, and develop a sense of self-affirmation.

Learning Human Rights Education Together – Building Social Capital and Empathy

Human rights education at Tajima Minami emphasizes horizontal relationships, highlighting Kikuchi (2024)'s assertion that human rights education in Japan focuses more on fostering respect and responsibility among members of society than the vertical relationship between the state and its citizens. Central characteristics of the human rights education program at Tajima Minami nurture social cohesion within the school community by facilitating relations, mutual learning and compassion for others. This emphasis on shared objectives, social cohesion and cultivating strong networks aligns with broader concepts of what has been termed 'Social Capital.' The notion

of Social Capital has been discussed by both Putnam (1995) and Fukuyama (1996) as aspects of social structure, such as networks, shared norms, and trust. Putnam highlights how communities with robust Social Capital are better able to resolve challenges through collective action, enhancing the quality of life in democratic societies. Fukuyama stresses that strong social ties promote more cohesive communities and enhance collective action. In a similar way, Tajima Minami's focus on building interpersonal relationships and fostering empathy aligns with these concepts, as "Education for Living" encourages the fostering of relationships in which students recognize their differences, support each other, and learn from each other, and where subject instruction cultivates compassionate hearts and attitudes as they learn together (Ono et al., 2022).

In describing the program, the teachers underscore the need to, "think about the causes and solutions when encountering difficulties from the perspectives of 'environmental adjustment' and 'connections with people'" (Saimura et al., 2022, page 14). By recognizing "connections with people" not only as a solution, but more significantly, the lacking of such connections as a fundamental cause of the challenges faced by their students, the school underscores the complex role that social relationships play in both contributing to and resolving these issues.

Kasulis (2002)'s work on philosophy and intercultural understanding provides insight into the way relationships are perceived in relational societies like Japan. He introduces the concept of the "intimacy model," where connections between individuals extend beyond mere social ties and become the fundamental units of meaning. In this model, relationships are not just about interactions but are essential for shaping internal relation with the surrounding world. This understanding of "intimacy" highlights the deep significance of personal and communal bonds in Japanese culture, positioning them as central to how individuals relate to and make sense of their surroundings.

One significant feature of human rights education at Tajima Minami is the "Thinking about our Real Names Initiative," which encourages students to reflect on their "real name and surname." Many individuals of Korean heritage in Japan are assigned both Japanese and Korean names. The choice of which name to use in daily life often becomes a deeply personal decision, as it carries implications for identity and social perception.

For Korean residents, choosing to use their Korean name may lead to their immediate identification as a foreigner, despite being born and raised in Japan. On the other hand, using their Japanese name may cause a sense of alienation from their heritage, distancing them from the name their family traditionally calls them by. This dilemma highlights the complexities of cultural identity in Japan, where navigating between Japanese and ethnic heritage involves both personal and societal dimensions. The curriculum in "Education for Living" engages students in these issues.

Through learning about the historical context of Korea-Japan relations and the system of dual naming, students are encouraged to discuss their "real names" in a safe and supportive environment. An after-school Korean ethnicity club, which draws participation not only from students of Korean descent but also from those without Korean heritage, further provides opportunities for learning and collaboration. Through these club activities, projects aimed at fostering cooperation with the local community are realized. As part of this program, students are guided to develop a broader sense of human rights, empathy, and intercultural understanding. As one of the teachers reflects, Ms. Ono shares, "Through these various learning experiences, we hope to help students develop a sense of human rights and develop the ability to see the inside of people's thoughts, feelings, and ways of interacting with others, without judging them based on their outside. We also hope that students will learn to live with compassion for themselves by making an effort to polish their insides, rather than only caring about the outside of themselves" (page 94). This educational approach allows students, especially those with Korean heritage, to gradually feel more comfortable revealing their "hidden" identities or discussing their second names. The initiative encourages them to reflect on their real names and the significance behind them.

The Importance of *Omoiyari*

In Japan, *omoiyari* (compassion) is integral to understanding oneself in relation to those around you. The teachers at Tajima Minami are not only aiming to teach students human rights education, but are also teaching them how to live in an interdependent society. Se and Karatsu (2004) see *omoiyari* as, "the ability and willingness to feel what others are feeling and to vicariously experience the pleasure or pain, even without being told ver-

bally" (page 276). Developing this foundational skill is an indispensable aim of education. For Ms. Besshō, a dedicated human rights education teacher, "The goal is for children to acquire a sense of various human rights, to accept the differences between themselves and others, and to develop a heart that can value the feelings of others" (Ono, et al., 2024, page 82). Teachers at Tajima Minami have successfully integrated aspects of human rights education into a program that emphasizes compassion, teaching all students how to be empathetic in a world where discrimination stems from a lack of compassion. While other studies on human rights education in Japan have mentioned the strong focus on *omoiyari* in the classroom and have offered valuable insights (Kikuchi, 2024; Kitayama & Hashizaki, 2018), they do not fully capture and position its central importance within Japanese culture. In a society rooted on the relational self, *omoiyari* is a vital skill for maintaining harmonious relationships. When harmony is achieved, it contributes significantly to an overall sense of well-being. In a different volume, Ms. Besshō elaborates again on the centrality of *omoiyari* stating:

> "Education for Living" was born from the idea of what knowledge children should know and what skills they should acquire in order to survive and protect their hearts. We believe that by learning about various human rights issues and *feeling an understanding and empathy for people* [emphasis added] in various positions, children can develop even stronger hearts. We hope that an environment where children can learn both, rather than just one or the other, will become more widespread. (Osaka Municipal Tajima Minami Elementary School and Tajima Junior High School, page 27)

This quote highlights how human rights education at Tajima Minami heavily relies on both knowledge development and emotional development. Learning about human rights issues in isolation may lead to theoretical understanding, but without empathy, this knowledge lacks the emotional depth needed to motivate meaningful change. By fostering empathy, the "Education for Living" ensures that students can relate to the experiences of others, making human rights more than just an abstract concept. Human rights education becomes a lived, felt responsibility where *omoiyari* is what transforms the recognition of human rights from a legal or social framework into a personal and emotional commitment to justice. After discussing how the school fosters interpersonal relationships, the next focus will be on the

connection between these relationships with students' ability to seek help when needed.

Sōdan Centers – Seeking Aid, Protection or Sympathy

The heart of human rights education at Tajima Minami is the emphasis on building relationships between students, between students and teachers, and between the school and the community. When these connections are established, students are taught both where to seek advice and how to be supportive through *sōdan* (consultation); not only helping them navigate difficult situations themselves but teaching them to be a trusted source of support for their friends. According to educators at Tajima Minami, a tragic case significantly motivated the decision to concentrate on *sōdan*:

> The background to the development of this program was the shock of the Atsugi City 5-year-old boy who died of starvation (May 30, 2014). In that case, the father who caused the 5-year-old boy to die of starvation was a single father with an intellectual disability. He also grew up with a mother who had a mental illness. If the father himself had been able to recognize his own disability and *seek the necessary help* [emphasis added], perhaps this incident would not have happened. (Saimura, et al., 2022, page 14)

For teachers at Tajima Minami, this tragic situation of child abuse underscored the importance of recognizing the need for help and fostering community connections for students, teachers and parents. The blame of this case did not focus solely on the tragic actions or non-actions of the individuals involved but was interpreted as the consequence of an inability to be dependent on others, to seek aid or protection. Students reviewed this case in class, where they learned definitions of abuse, laws, and about the counseling agencies and welfare systems that can help. This case demonstrates how fostering empathy and reliance on others is meant to prevent such tragedies, bringing students back to the values of support networks and social services.

For children, it can be difficult to share personal challenges, especially at a young age. Teachers play a critical role in bridging that gap, providing a model of trust and care that encourages students to open up and disclose the troubles they face. At Tajima Minami, specific lessons on children's rights

encourage students to reflect on what they can do when their rights are not respected or when facing challenging problems. For example, over several lessons, third-grade students learn about children's rights, rank these rights based on their own perceived importance, review real-world examples of rights violations, and discuss where and how to seek assistance. Using case studies, they identify appropriate sources of help for different situations. The school teaches students they can seek support from parents, teachers, friends, trusted adults, or institutions like schools, police stations, and consultation centers. And while difficult subjects are discussed openly in class, the school also utilizes a "Problem Counseling School Post" box, which allows students to submit letters about problems they are experiencing. This has surfaced cases on issues like bullying, gender identity, neglect, and refusing to attend school. This proactive approach turns learning into tangible, real-world support systems for students in need.

Ms. Ono, a key figure in the development of the "Education for Living" program writes that

> Rather than avoiding children because they are in the midst of problems, we need to ensure that they know that there are places in the world that will help them and people who will protect them. We also want the students to experience and feel firsthand in class that there are peers who are seriously thinking about solving the problems that they have been carrying alone and that they cannot solve on their own. This is what we most want to teach in our 'Education for Living' lessons. (Saimura, et. al., 2022, page 16)

These bonds help develop emotional resilience, a key part of *omoiyari* (compassion), where students learn that connections lead to stronger hearts in the pursuit of human rights. Consistent with the sense of interdependency, Kasulis (2002) suggests that "Only when we enter a relationship for the creative aspect of the relationship itself are we on the way to intimacy" (page 44). The relationships between teachers, students, and peers are not just a means to an end (being able to rely on someone else) but are valuable for their own sake (relationship as objective). The school nurtures a sense of shared responsibility, encouraging children to view others' problems as their own. This holistic approach to human rights education teaches students that emotional support and reliance on others are integral to individual and collective well-being.

Lastly, teachers aim to instill in students the idea that their experiences, no matter how difficult, are valid and that their classmates and society are there to help:

> We need to raise all children to turn their attention to their friends and society, and to think that happy and sad things are not just someone else's problem. Children who were not cared for as babies, children whose rights were not respected. Children who should not be told the truth about their background... We need to be considerate and continue to carry out practices that test our resolve. But the children are watching closely to see if their teacher will accept them for who they are. (Ono et al., 2024, page 16)

By modeling this acceptance and fostering an environment of mutual care, Tajima Minami's program highlights how human rights education starts with the recognition that no one is truly alone in facing life's challenges. As such, we see the fostering of Social Capital as a return to the community: a revisiting of the need for connections, networks and social services to prevent the terrible things that occurred in this case.

Making the Local Center

Decisions regarding the planning and implementation of human rights education are made at the local level, allowing for greater flexibility in addressing specific community needs. In the interdependent mode, individual actions are understood to be bound within specific situational contexts, a configuration of relationships that each person has established (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). This is important to foreground how human rights education is tailored within these situational contexts to address local issues in a localized way, as seen in Tajima Minami's approach. This school incorporates what is referred to as *Osaka-rashiku*—an Osaka-style approach—into its lessons. At Tajima Minami the term *Osaka-rashiku* refers to lessons that are deeply embedded in the local context, using culturally specific "Osaka-style" humor and communication styles unique to the region. These lessons reflect local experiences and values that cannot be easily found in standardized textbooks.

In this localized approach to human rights education, educators in Tajima Minami work to address the local "unfreedoms" that hinder their students from forming relationships, seeking help, or connecting with oth-

ers. The "unfreedoms" being addressed manifest in specific local challenges faced by the students. Drawing on Nancy (1993)'s concept of freedom as understood as not "… a philosophical absolute … but a relational and contextual practice that takes shape in opposition to whatever is locally and ideologically conceived as unfreedom" (Nancy, 1993 in Brown, 2020, page 6), in the context of Ikuno Ward, where students face specific challenges related to socio-economic conditions, cultural heritage, and discrimination, teachers aim to restore students' freedom by equipping them with the tools to reconnect with others. This is particularly important in areas where marginalized groups live. Through human rights education, teachers help students build social relationships and a sense of belonging, which are viewed as critical components of their freedom.

The teachers at Tajima Minami argue that this model of human rights education is applicable to all students, not just those who have experienced trauma. The ultimate goal is to foster happiness among students by strengthening their sense of self and their ability to form meaningful connections. A teacher's message encapsulates this adaptive, localized approach to education:

> There is no manual for "education for living." Although there is a basic framework, the issues that arise vary depending on the municipality and the circumstances of the area. As society and the situation of the children constantly change, the content of education must also evolve. The essence of 'Education for Living' is teaching students how to take care of themselves—physically, mentally, and emotionally—so they can take care of others as well. (Saimura, et al., 2022, page 18).

This perspective underscores how much value teachers place on the responsiveness to the local context and the evolving needs of students in creating effective human rights education programs.

Discussion

The study of school systems is, in and of itself, an analysis of the global landscape of national educational frameworks, where "the grammar of schooling is global" (Baker and LeTendre, 2005, page 9). This inquiry into the practice of human rights education occurs at the intersection of domestic (local and national) and global contexts, where private, non-governmental, and

governmental institutions engage with onto-cultural phenomena. Japan presents a unique opportunity for study, not only due to its epistemic and ontological differences but also due to its particular organization of human rights education and the responsibilities allocated to local municipal boards of education. This study has raised critical questions about the direction of human rights education in Japan. Are critics attempting to reshape Japan's human rights education to align more closely with individualistic models to promote human rights-based agendas? Instead, why not leverage the strengths of Japan's interdependent social fabric to effect social change? This approach may provide more culturally resonant human rights education programming that reflects the unique ontological dynamics in Japanese society.

The type of human rights education we witness being taught at Tajima Minami counters neoliberal market logics that emphasize individualism and competition. By fostering on community connections, the program demonstrates how human rights education can be a collective endeavor. The "Education for Living" program exemplifies how Japanese teachers can localize human rights education from an individualistic focus to a more interdependent orientation. The intersection of education and human rights education lies in the space where those that experience discrimination can find solidarity with allies. In this way, human rights education is being used not to isolate an individual, but to bring in those in the periphery in commonality and connection with others. This may be a space where the convergence of Western and Japanese practices creates hybridity, as human rights education is used within Japanese ontological boundaries. As Ms. Besshō states, "in the small society of the elementary school, children should learn the importance of justice prevailing." (Osaka Municipal Tajima Minami Elementary School and Tajima Junior High School, page 25)

By employing a hermeneutics of hope, this research reveals how investigations can become entangled in suspicion, losing the ability to illuminate success stories that are essential for fruitful dialogue. By highlighting the school's focus on relationships, scholars may feel empowered to celebrate the unique interdependent modes found in their visions of human rights education.

I finish this paper with an image that is not uncommon in Japanese schools (Figure 4). 'Sports Day' activities at Japanese schools often feature impressive human pyramids, where students demonstrate teamwork and

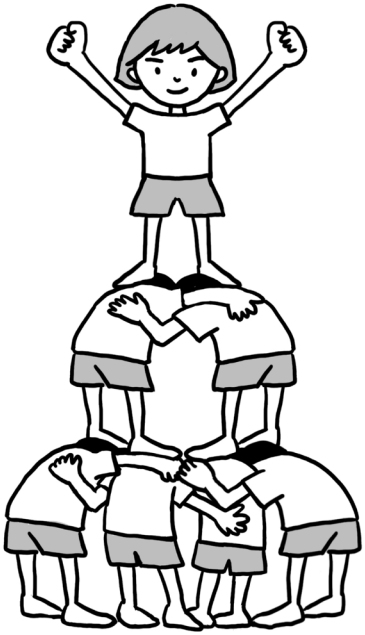

Figure 4 - How Interdependence Supports Independence (illustration by Nami Shimada)

cooperation by stacking themselves in creative formations. In this visual, the students at the bottom symbolize interdependence, providing a strong foundation that supports the individual at the top, who represents independence. This dynamic illustrates that true independence is achieved through the strength of relationships and community, highlighting the idea that independence means increasing the number of people you depend on (Kumagaya, 2024).

While the relationship between interdependence and independence is often characterized by tension, viewed as oppositional concepts, "Education for Living" illustrates that students can achieve personal growth and self-actualization within interdependent frameworks. By focusing on interdependent possibilities, this study sought to contribute to alternative approaches for addressing human rights abuses and protecting the vulnerable. Understanding Japan's approach to human rights education is imperative for tackling social issues where students navigate the ontological complexities of individualism and interdependency. Human rights education programs that incorporate cultural traditions that value harmony, community, and respect for others contrast with Western models that prioritize legal frameworks or individual rights. Human rights education teaching in Japan reflects an interdependent self-construal, teaching interdependence with the surrounding environment. Rather than being seen as lagging behind Western models due to a lack of alignment with legalistic or rights-based frameworks, this case offers alternative pathways for understanding and promoting human rights. Bringing these two types of human rights education into dialogue may create opportunities to strengthen both approaches, leading to a more nuanced understanding of human rights education. By examining how this school localized its version of human rights education, we are presented

with counterbalances to dominant global human rights discourse, opening new avenues for culturally sensitive approaches to human rights education.

By consistently reinforcing that students are not alone and encouraging them to reach out to *sōdan* centers, Tajima Minami's teachers foster relationships as ends in themselves rather than means to an end. In doing so, they recognize that by promoting an interdependent mode, they are directly contributing to the happiness and well-being of their students. This type of human rights education offers alternative perspectives on how interdependence can serve to support independence. For how well intended internationally agreed-upon human rights initiatives are, if their push towards schools globally is not inclusive of local alternatives and sensibilities, these initiatives themselves may become sources of hegemonic power.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, the exploration of the "Education for Living" program at a school in Osaka provided critical insights into how human rights education can be effectively actualized within the unique cultural and social landscape of Japan. By addressing the foundational question of what schools can do to prevent sad lives, this inquiry highlights the importance of fostering interdependence and building strong relationships among students.

Alternative conceptualizations of human rights and human rights education receive limited attention. The "Education for Living" program's emphasis on empathy, compassion, and horizontal connections among individuals not only reflects the specific practices rooted in Japanese culture but also offers valuable lessons for educators globally. As this case study demonstrates, engaging with local contexts and traditions allows for a more nuanced understanding of human rights education, encouraging educators to consider alternative models that promote the well-being of students. Ultimately, the "Education for Living" program serves as a vital example of how schools can play an active role in cultivating not only knowledgeable citizens but also compassionate individuals who are equipped to contribute positively to their communities.

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