

Child Power*

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The Japanese education system has been much debated over the last few years among educators and leading personalities. Most agree that it should be reformed to decrease the drop-out rate, violence among students, and “classroom collapse,”¹ and to adapt to an increasingly information technology-based society. However, there is no consensus on the form and means of change, and even though teachers have been trying hard to adjust to new ideas, they are not yet sure how to. They still lead the students in every aspect of school life and dread the idea of giving students more freedom.

In recent years, I have heard much about child rights, but, while I am conscious of the need to respect them, my practice sometimes contradicts my theory. I unconsciously treat my students as objects to be guided rather than as actors with rights.

For 10 years I have been teaching at the Kayano Elementary School in Minoo City, Osaka, where I am a sixth-grade homeroom teacher. The 500-student school, in a district that includes a *buraku* (outcast) community, promotes Dowa education. Through the school’s new Integrated Study Program, students learn subjects not found in the curriculum.

I found out for myself that students can act responsibly given the chance and support.

Dancing on Field Day

On field day, students prepare activities guided by the teachers. If the activity is a dance, teachers teach the students how to dance and they normally practice until just before the field day.

The 2000 field day was different. Most of the students wanted to perform the *para-para*, the latest dance in Japan, and to dance to the

songs “Summer Festival” and “Love is Magic.” We formed a group of 10 volunteers to organize the activity. Some wanted to perform the *para-para*, others, a jazz dance. They finally agreed to perform both, with a smaller group formed for each. The groups mastered the dances in a week.

During the first practice, one third of the students could dance the *para-para* but none of the teachers could. It was a wonderful change. For once the students themselves decided on the music and choreography. They led the dance practices. Teachers and students who had been forced to dance in previous years were convinced that this field day would be different.

As a child, I did not like dance practices for field day because the teachers would get angry whenever I made a mistake. As a teacher, I also forced my students to dance. Now I was challenged. I promised to learn the dance before the field day and asked everyone to help me. The *para-para* is a “cool” dance that teachers find difficult to choreograph. Halfway through rehearsals, other teachers asked, “Wouldn’t an easier dance be better?” Soon, however, the whole school was alive with dance music and

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students were dancing in groups as if they were in a disco.

The school newsletter described the 2000 field day as epoch-making. I witnessed child power that day: every single student was dancing, surprising the previous homeroom teacher of my class.

Another experience proved that students could be trusted. When I became the homeroom teacher of a sixth-grade class four years ago, I had to take charge of gymnastics on field day. I followed the existing program because I didn't think I could create a new one, much less teach it. But when an organizing group was created, I consulted the students about the theme, story, and acts for the program. Everything went smoothly. Since the students themselves worked on the program, they were serious and cooperated with each other. My heart had been heavy at the thought that I alone would be giving them instructions, but I enjoyed the way things turned out.

Students' Opinions

Students do not have the chance to express their opinions in school. Each subject is taught according to rules and a set course of study. While teachers should teach systematically, students' opinions are ignored in the name of "instruction." Students are not asked if they want to eat in groups, where they want to go for excursions, what of sportswear they prefer, if they want to go to school in groups, or if they can wear watches to school.

Grade-6 students in 1996 attended an integrated class on town development, the objective of which was to plan ways to improve Minoo. They divided themselves into groups to take care of roads, parks, and schools. In a "student parliament," a group representative said the students wanted school meals to be served as a smorgasbord. The school superintendent at that time (a former principal of the elementary school) replied that school meals were nutritionally balanced and that it was self-

ish (*wagamama*) for students to want to eat only their favorites. His reply reflected how all teachers thought. When students said they wanted to bring their watches to school, I dismissed the request as "unimportant." I reacted the way many teachers would: they think that watches are unnecessary since every classroom has a clock. A colleague suggested that I take up the matter with the students, and I realized that although we thought we were respecting their independence, even I was trying to impose my own values on them.

The same students met to discuss the excursion and team activity for the field day. Homeroom teachers normally advise the students, but when they presented their plan, they announced that they had always done what the teacher wanted them to do and that in their final year, they wanted to produce a play of their choosing. The students went on to write "Colonel von Trapp," based on *The Sound of Music*, with an antiwar and pro-peace theme. I found out then that when students are determined to do what they want, they can be trusted to perform well.

Trusting the Students

In 2000, grade-5 students raised several ideas during the planning meeting for field day. One was a play, "A Plea from Sunny" (on the abolition of landmines), and a series of ghost stories; another was a festival. Some students suggested a drum performance for the festival or the *yagibushi* (folksong) they were learning in music class. They came up with a rough plan and the teacher finished the script at the final planning stage. In "A Plea from the Ghost and Sunny," Sunny tells the festival-going ghost about the horrors of landmines, saying, "Peace is not enough." In the last scene, everybody sang a song for peace. At the opening of the play, the students played the drums. Members of the community Drum Preservation Club arranged the music and helped the students rehearse.

The sound of drums reverberated during break time, sometimes even during class. In two weeks the students had memorized several music scores and the choreography while the teachers' tasks were limited to announcing the practice schedule, setting the deadline to memorize the music scores, and requesting the hiring of drums. Students, even a slightly built one, got together from early morning to carry the drums. On field day the school was filled with their powerful beat. As the students accomplished more, they gained confidence and became more reliable.

In March 2000 student representatives started preparing for the graduation ceremonies. As an integrated study class was ongoing we could not recruit members for the organizing group. Teachers presented a rough proposal for the graduation ceremonies: four students would say a few words of farewell, then a group would read a poem and sing a song. The two poems and about 10 songs suggested by students were put to a vote. Students warned that love songs were unsuitable for graduation day and fast-paced songs would not be understood. The teachers left the students alone. The students' standard for choosing the graduation ceremony song was clear and they were taking the selection seriously.

A student brought a compact disc of "Haikai Roman," played by a band called 19. This student disliked school and had spent a lot of time in game centers and karaoke bars, so he knew a lot of songs. The lyrics of the song begin with, "Thank you very much. Please help me in various ways from now on, too." It is suitable for graduation day as it reminds the listener to cherish the memory of school and to work hard. "Haikai Roman" was selected by two thirds of the students. During the first practice, however, the teachers scolded the students for not taking the difficult song seriously. It was the school-hating student who recommended it who exhorted his classmates to sing it properly.

During the graduation ceremony, the graduates received their diplomas and then presented

their program. The grade-5 students enjoyed it so much that they said they would play the drums at their own graduation ceremony, too.

Respecting the Independence of Students

When students reach puberty, they become critical of adults and have difficulty controlling their feelings. When I was a grade-6 homeroom teacher, my relationship with the students was worse than when I was teaching grade 5. The other grade-6 teachers and I eventually overcame the problem.

My homeroom students are all full of life and well behaved but do not always obey their teachers. Sometimes we have a contest of wills, but our basic rule is to consult the students about important matters and help them make their own decisions. A teacher visiting from a junior high school was surprised to find such capable elementary school students and said that junior high school students should be able to emulate them.

During meetings to discuss the Integrated Study Program, students started by saying, "I don't want to go to school" and "I want to play." Then before we knew it, they had decided what to do: prepare a performance for the students, make goods to sell at a flea market, play the drums, dance, or skip rope. Even during break periods, the videotape of *yosakoi soran* (folk dances with music) was played, and more and more students came to join the dance team.

Teachers should gather the students together and put them to work but not bear all the responsibility for the students' school life. Now teachers of the same grade cooperate in taking care of their students. Teachers of different grades cooperate with parents or guardians and the community. Most important, teachers trust their students to do the right thing.

I have seen disagreements between students and teachers, and although I may believe that something is correct and reasonable, I also know that people will always have different perceptions and convincing reasons for their

perceptions. From a workshop on human relationships I learned that conflicts of opinion with students are natural and that they become more stubborn when teachers impose their own viewpoint. Even when teachers think they are doing something to benefit the students, forcing our opinion on them will leave them unsatisfied and push them to rebel. I was surprised to hear a child arrogantly scolding his friend like a teacher. After I told him to stop, I realized that I had used the same tone myself. Students learn from what adults say and do and it is natural for them to resist if teachers try to hold them down.

From the second term of 2000, we discussed the Integrated Study Program with the students' parents or guardians, consulting them during planning and welcoming their support for our activities. One participant said that if teachers decided everything, the parents or guardians would just be carrying out predetermined activities and get bored. When their opinions are taken seriously, however, they

become active and enthusiastic. The same is true for students.

The most important part of a teacher's work is asking students, "What do you want to do?" Students should be allowed to state their opinions and reach a consensus while teachers should create an environment conducive to interaction among students.

Adults often complain about children demanding their rights but do not seem to realize that they push their own ideas on the children. I found through experience that students are not irresponsible when they are not treated like "children." I always remind myself to respect them as self-reliant persons and equal partners while consciously and objectively reflecting on what I do and say as a teacher.

Note

1. "Classroom collapse" refers to the failure of the students to behave in class, and of the teacher to keep order.