

Early Literacy in Japanese and Australian Classes

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Despite the stereotype of the Japanese as imitators, Japanese education is likely to continue to attract the attention of foreign observers for the foreseeable future, not because it has imitated Anglo-Saxon policies, but because it has maintained a different and distinctive course. (Cave, 2001, p. 187)

Introduction

This is a case study of two classes of children beginning their literacy education in primary school, in the respective countries of Japan and Australia. A comparison of the teaching of literacy between a Japanese and Australian class is a complex task because the Japanese and English languages differ radically in terms of both the spoken language and orthography. Accordingly, the primary focus of this study is the cultural beliefs underpinning the respective teaching methodologies. The teaching of literacy will be examined with reference to three major issues: the composition of students in the class, the design and organization of classroom space, and the lessons. Areas which merit further investigation, but which are beyond the scope of this study are parental involvement in early literacy, and assessment.

In this study the term *literacy* encompasses the development of skills in both oral and written language. Written language cannot be isolated from

oral language since the two interact in complex ways. Oral language skills essentially form the foundation of the later development of written skills (Christie, 1984, p. 65; Depree and Iversen, 1994, p. 87), and thus are also an important focus of this study.

Methodology

The classes that were observed were a Year One class in a public primary school in Japan, and a Reception/Year One class in a private primary school in Australia. Fieldwork consisted of observation of lessons at both the Japanese and the Australian schools, discussions with the class teachers, informal discussions with parents of children starting school in Japan and Australia, participation in Parent Observation Days at the Japanese school and the experience of a year as a parent of a child in Year One in the Japanese school. In the Japanese school eleven lessons were observed over the course of the year. In Australia ten lessons were observed over a period of two weeks.

Education Systems

Japan

Education in Japan is highly centralized (see Benjamin, 1997; Wray, 1999; Collinson and Ono, 2001; Yoneyama 1999). The national curriculum is prescribed by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. The age of entry and nomenclature of the year levels in the primary schools are uniform across the country. Students start Year One in the April after their sixth birthday. The school year begins in April and ends in March,

and there are three terms in the school year. All Japanese schools in the year 2001, during which this study was undertaken, held classes from Monday to Friday, and on the morning of the first, third and fifth (if applicable to the month in question) Saturdays of the month. The Saturday morning classes were due to be phased out in the school year beginning in April 2002. Primary school education continues for six years, and is followed by three years of compulsory middle school and three years of non-compulsory high school.

Australia

In contrast to Japan, education in Australia is relatively decentralized. The Australian states vary in their interpretations of the National Goals of Schooling. The states use national curriculum documents as a source to produce their own state curricula (Kennedy, 1998). The states thus have control over their respective education systems but the Commonwealth Government influences state policies and provides additional financial assistance (McKinnon, 1991).

The independence of the states is evidenced in the differences in the age of entry and the nomenclature of the year levels. The first year of school is known by the following names: Kindergarten in New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory, Prep in Victoria, Year One in Queensland and Western Australia, Reception in South Australia, Preparatory in Tasmania and Transition in the Northern Territory. The ages at which children begin school are as follows: age five by 31st July in New South Wales, age five by 30th April in Victoria, age six by 31st December in Queensland and Western Australia, continuous entry after age five in South Australia, age five by 1st January in Tasmania, age five by 30th April in the Australian Capital Territory, and age five by 30th June or after their fifth

birthday in the Northern Territory (Commonwealth of Australia, 1996, p. 36).

The school year begins in late January and finishes in December, and there are four terms in the school year. The term dates vary slightly between the states and between the private and the public sectors. The school week is from Monday to Friday. In South Australia the most common provision of schooling is seven years of primary school and five years of secondary school, although other combinations are possible, such as schools for Reception to Year Ten, and separate junior primary schools to Year Two followed by primary schools from Years Three to Seven. Some private schools offer six years of primary school and six years of secondary school, which are sometimes divided into three years of middle school and three years of senior school.

Introduction to the Schools

Izumi Primary School (a pseudonymous name)

Izumi Primary School is an inner city public school in the city of Matsuyama, on the island of Shikoku, Japan. In the year 2001 the school day began at 8 am, and classes for Year One students finished at 2 pm on Monday, Wednesday and Thursday when there were four lessons, 3 pm on Tuesday and Friday when there were five lessons, and 11.20 am on Saturday when there were three lessons.

Cranbrook Christian School (a pseudonymous name)

This school is a private suburban school in South Australia for students from Reception to Year 10. Unlike public schools in South Australia there is no continuous entry during the year, so children start Reception after

their fifth birthday at the beginning of the school year in late January. The school day begins at 8.50 am and finishes at 3.20 pm.

The Composition of the Classes

Class Sizes

Izumi Primary School

The Year One class consisted of twenty-seven Year One students, thirteen girls and fourteen boys, increasing to fifteen boys early in Term Two. This class was slightly larger than the average class size of twenty-seven according to statistics from 1999 (Daily Yomiuri: 21 October, 2001, p. 9), but significantly smaller than the maximum class size of forty. There was a total of eighty-one students in Year One. If there had been eighty, there would have been two classes of forty, but because there were eighty-one, there were three classes in Year One.

Cranbrook Christian School

The Year One/Reception class consisted of twenty-five students: thirteen boys and twelve girls. The maximum possible class size was twenty-eight.

Graded versus Nongraded Classes

An important difference between the schools was that the class at Izumi Primary School was graded and the class at Cranbrook Christian School was nongraded. Nongraded classes comprise students from adjacent year levels, and are common in primary schools in English-speaking countries. In Japan nongraded classes are only found in geographically isolated locations (such as islands) where there are insufficient numbers to form graded classes. In Australia nongraded classes are a common solu-

tion to the need to create a particular class size, although sometimes they are formed because of the perceived benefits (Hatton, 1997).

At Cranbrook Christian School the children in Reception were seated on the left of the classroom and children in Year One on the right. The two levels were treated as discrete groups for spelling and handwriting, but not for reading. There were two curricula that were taught consecutively over two year periods, ensuring lessons were not repeated in these periods. According to the teacher an advantage of the graded class was that she could give extra attention to a Year One child whose reading was at Reception level. However the teacher indicated that the reason that the nongraded class was implemented was to provide flexibility with student numbers.

Nongraded classes in English-speaking countries are not necessarily formed due to numerical constraints, but also because of the perceived shortcomings of graded classes. The object of graded classes is that students of the same age achieve a particular standard by the end of the year, but this approach has been criticized in Anglo-western societies because children develop at different rates (Aina, 2001, p. 219-220). Kennedy concurs: "Grade-levels, by their lock-step nature, which traditionally links to chronological age, are therefore seen as barriers to meeting young learners' needs" (1998, p. 107).

Proponents of nongraded classes extol the many benefits such as "cooperative learning, team teaching and individualized instruction" (Kelly-Vance et al., 2000, p. 387). Further advantages outlined by Kelly-Vance et al. include the promotion of reading skills and improved academic performance. Aina outlines the following advantages of nongraded classes: maintaining the same teacher and many of the same classmates over time,

the stable school environment, the opportunity to interact with students of a range of ages and abilities and thus develop a sense of responsibility, and the fact that teaching and learning are not confined to a particular level (2001, p. 220). Group work is an important feature of nongraded classes, in particular peer tutoring of a student in a higher year level with a student of a lower year level (Watson et al., p. 1995).

Thus enthusiasm for the nongraded class as a means of affirming student diversity is widespread. The underlying philosophy indicates a child-centred approach to education in which the theme of meeting individual children's needs is recurrent:

In actuality, the child is the starting point in this educational practice. In simplest terms, the multiage classroom allows children to progress from one concept or skill level to the next as they are ready without regard to their age or grade. (Aina, 2001, p. 222)

Teachers in nongraded classrooms are expected to tailor the learning experiences to the needs of the individual child. Thus it is hypothesized that each student is more likely to reach his or her maximum potential in the nongraded classroom. (Kelly Vance et al., 2000, p. 374)

The philosophy that underpins a multi-age classroom is a developmental one where children are valued as individuals and where they are allowed to progress at their own rate and where there is scope for the development of individual interests and abilities. (Ure, 1995, p. 49)

Second Language Learners

The classes in each of the schools differed in terms of the range of first languages represented. In the class at Cranbrook Christian School, six students were of a non-English speaking background; five were from Russian families and one was Filipino. These students had extra lessons in English as a Second Language (ESL) once a week. The school population also included Indigenous students, other Russian and Filipino students, and German, Spanish and Indian students. In the class at Izumi Primary School there was an Australian and a Korean student, and there was also an American student in a higher grade. However none of these students was considered to be in need of Japanese language support.

Nozaki warns against regarding Japanese culture as homogeneous: “[I]t would be a mistake, at least for us educators and researchers, to assume that Japanese culture is monolithic and to reify it as such” (2000, p. 375). Although multiculturalism in Japan does not exist on the same scale as in Australia, it is important to remember that the student population of Japanese schools does include students of whom one or both parents are foreign. Seibert Vaipae (2001) conducted a study of language minority children from diverse backgrounds in Japanese public schools. These are children of whom neither parent speaks Japanese and who speak a language other than English at home. In 1997 those who were deemed in need of additional language instruction included speakers of Portuguese, Chinese, Spanish, Tagalog, Korean, Vietnamese and English (Seibert Vaipae, 2001, p. 186). Furthermore an increase in the number of foreigners coming to Japan to work between the late 1970’s and the 1990’s has resulted in an increase in international marriages, and thus a “foreign baby boom” (Noguchi, 2001a, p. 235). However instruction in Japanese as a Second Lan-

guage (JSL) in schools is not widespread, and is currently offered in about fifty of the public primary and middle schools in the 3223 municipalities in Japan (Daily Yomiuri, 8 February, 2002, p. 7). In response to the increasing number of foreign children in primary schools who need Japanese language support new guidelines for teaching JSL will be adopted by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology in 2003 (Daily Yomiuri, 26 February, 2002, p. 2).

Individual Differences

Japanese attitudes towards individual differences contrast significantly with those of English speaking countries. Tsuneyoshi (1991, p. 168) outlines the following major differences between American and Japanese education. A premise of American education that children possess inherited differences and thus American education programmes have special classes for gifted children. A high achiever could skip a grade in an American school but not in a Japanese one. In contrast, Tsuneyoshi (1991), Singleton (1991) and Cummings (1980) observe that in Japan high achievement is attributed to diligence. The classes in Japanese primary schools are not streamed and there is little provision for students who need either remedial help or acceleration (Lee et al, 1996, p.168). An important assumption is that children are of equal potential:

For teachers, competition creates division and pulls a child toward a negative individualism. (White, 1987, p. 115)

The attitude that innate abilities have relatively little to do with differences in performance extends not only to academic subjects but

also to the arts, and it is simply and accurately assumed that every child can learn to play several instruments, read music, paint, draw and sculpt satisfactorily. (James and Benjamin, 1988, p. 29-30)

Furthermore Stevenson et al. contend that Chinese and Japanese have no equivalent of the English expression 'reading disability', and highlight the differing attitudes between western, and Chinese and Japanese cultures:

There is also a much stronger tendency, we believe, to categorize individuals on the basis of ability or disability in the West than in Asian countries. In Taiwan and Japan it is likely that retardation in reading would be attributed to lack of proper experience and poor motivation. Inadequate performance is considered a matter of not trying hard enough or not being taught effectively rather than possessing a disability. (1982, p. 1178)

However a minority of Japanese children do experience reading difficulties. Clearly individual differences do exist in Japanese classes as elsewhere. One way of addressing the issue of diversity is the carefully organized use of small group work. The *han* (small group) is typically comprised of children of mixed abilities, such as children with "leadership qualities, problem children, caring children, and both fast and slow learners" (Okano and Tsuchiya, 1999, p. 59).

Diversity is a major platform of decision-making in Australian educational policy. These sources of diversity include the range of students' ages that is a feature of non-graded classrooms, multiculturalism and the approaches to teaching literacy. The need for an eclectic approach to

teaching literacy was emphasized in the New English of the 1970's:

The exciting thing about the New English -about all teaching today- is the fact that there is no one method to be enforced. (Saxby and Turney, 1974, p. 6)

This view is currently unchanged; it is still believed that a single prescriptive approach to literacy is not necessary, and this is echoed in government policy documents:

Classroom strategies must be ones which recognize that different children respond to different approaches. In addition, teachers need support to enable them to respond to children who require special assistance including the gifted and talented. No matter how effective classroom strategies are, it may be necessary to withdraw the child from the classroom for individual or small group assistance. (The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1993, 5.1)

The variety of children's experience of literacy-related activities prior to school entry, and in their individual dispositions to learning, means that no single approach to teaching literacy will be appropriate for all learners. The high expectations of success in achieving literacy competence means that consideration must be given to the diverse needs of different groups of children, including those who speak English as their second language, bilingual students, and Indigenous students. (Commonwealth of Australia, 1998, p. 31)

There is no single commonly accepted approach to teaching literacy across school systems in Australia: that is, no State or Territory specifies a preferred methodology for literacy instruction. (ibid)

Literacy is very much affected by the experiences, cultures and community-based discourses and knowledges of students, so no one approach or formula is ideal for diverse communities. (Education Queensland, 2000, p.3)

In Australia diversity forms the basis of various educational practices such as individual learning programmes for each child, withdrawal of students from lessons who need additional help, and extension for those who are considered to be gifted or talented. Accordingly, many children in the Year One classes at Cranbrook Christian School were withdrawn for individual instruction of various kinds. Children whose first language was a language other than English were withdrawn for ESL instruction, children with special needs were withdrawn for Special Education, and parent volunteers came to the classroom every morning to hear children read their *take-home readers*. Furthermore selected children were withdrawn for the Learning Assistance Program (LAP). Children in the LAP program were allocated to a parent volunteer by the LAP coordinator. The aim was to build a relationship and support the child, thus providing more than simply academic help. According to the teacher the LAP program provided not just remedial help but also extension, because it was hard to extend a child in the class context. LAP covered all subjects but in the junior school focused on reading, spelling, tables and maths.

Clearly Japan also possesses a rich diversity of cultures (see Noguchi,

2001b; Okano and Tsuchiya, 1999), but this diversity is not a basis of differential classroom practice. Thus students are not withdrawn from classes for extra attention. The whole class focuses on a particular subject simultaneously and neither independent study nor individual instruction are prevalent (Cummings, 1980). Significantly, despite the lack of remedial help relatively few children experience difficulties in learning to read and write in Japan. Perhaps the underlying assumption that it is effort and effective teaching that produce a high standard of literacy explain why the standards are generally high despite a lack of attention to individual differences.

The 2000 OECD assessment of reading performance of fifteen year olds highlights differences in achievement between countries which have a high proportion of students at the highest and lowest levels of proficiency, such as Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand and the UK, and countries which have a cluster of students at the median levels and fewer at the extremes, such as Korea and Japan (2001, p. 45). Japan was one of "the three countries with the smallest differences between the 75th and 25th percentiles" (2001, p. 58), the others being Finland and Korea. In contrast the report highlights Australia as belonging to the three countries with "the highest overall variation in reading performance" (2001, p. 62), the others being New Zealand and Norway. The report recommends: "In these countries, most individual variation occurs within schools, suggesting that individual schools need to cater for a more diverse client base" (ibid).

The observations of Cummings (1980), Stevenson et al (1982), Tsuneyoshi (1991) and Lee et al (1996) that in Japan the whole class proceeds as a unit rather than individuals being singled out for special treatment were borne out in the present study. This practice may be responsible for the

clustered performance of Japanese students highlighted in the OECD report. Conversely, the expectation in Australia that children proceed at their own pace may in fact contribute to the varying proficiency levels across the population. The question of why Japanese performance in literacy tests is clustered and that of Anglo-western countries more varied, merits further investigation.

The Design and Organization of the Classroom

Izumi Primary School

The students sat in three rows with boys next to girls, at single desks which had been pushed together. The children's surnames and numbers appeared on cardboard in metal slots on the back of each chair.

The children were in the habit of moving the desks to accommodate different activities; at lunchtime desks were arranged to form larger groups of four to six children facing each other. On one particular Parent Observation Day the desks were rearranged to form two U shapes, one fitting inside the other.

The timetable was displayed on a board on the left wall at the front of the classroom. A small chalkboard was positioned under this with the lesson plan for the next day on which was written the date, the subjects to be studied, the lessons for that day, and what to bring for each lesson. These details were entered into a communication book on a daily basis so the children would know what books and other items to bring to school the following day. Above the main board was a chart of the *hiragana* syllabary, a diagram of how to hold a pencil, and later in the year, a chart of the *katakana* syllabary. The classroom featured changing displays of children's work in which parents took great interest on Parent Observation

Days.

This arrangement of the space, with children sitting in rows facing the chalkboard, in a desk that identified their name and their number, created a formal atmosphere.

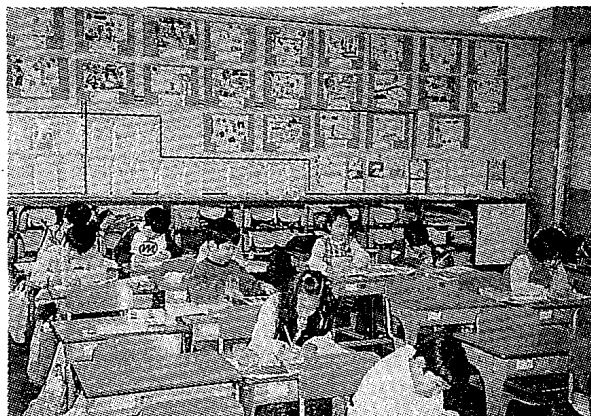
Cranbrook Christian School

The classroom consisted of two main spaces for children to sit. By the door there was a large space for the children to sit on the carpet. On the other side of the room there were desks arranged in a variant of a U shape; children at the back faced the blackboard, children on the sides faced the centre, and there were two other desks inside the U shape on each side facing the blackboard. Each desk was a double desk seating two students. Children moved between the two areas according to the demands of the activity. Children used the carpeted space for activities that tended to have an oral emphasis such as listening to stories told by the teacher, group activities involving a high degree of participation, and silent reading. The teacher sat at an easel in the front of the carpeted space while the children sat on the floor. The desk area was used when the children were focusing on the chalkboard or writing in their exercise books, and tended to be more a focus for individual effort.

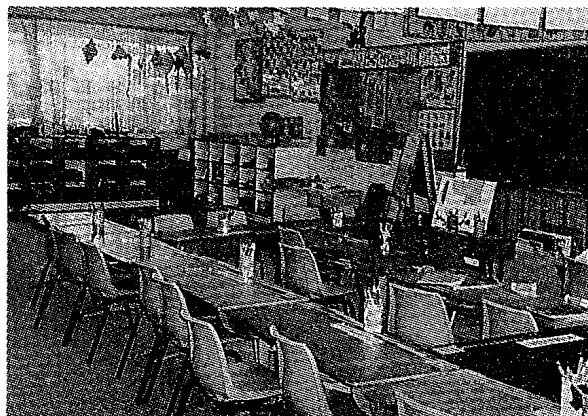
This use of the space enabled a very fluid regrouping of the children during the lesson. In the Australian nongraded class the practice of having one year level work at their desks while the other works on the carpet appears to be standard practice (see Watson et al., 1995, p. 150).

An adjoining classroom of the same year level had the same division of carpeted space and deskspace but the desks were arranged in groups: two groups of four and three groups of six. Thus there was a variation of the seating plan between the teachers according to their preferences. When

asked about this difference the teacher replied that she had chosen this seating plan because it promoted effective teamwork.



Izumi Primary School



Cranbrook Christian School

1. Note the different seating arrangements. 2. Both classrooms provided rich displays of children's work.

Seating plans in classrooms in English-speaking countries have been influenced by the Open Classroom of the early 1970's. Blitz (1973) describes the focus on physical movement and the emphasis on the curriculum being dictated by the needs of the learner:

Whatever the particular outward form of the open classroom, the essential thought behind it is that children are unique, physically active individuals, and that their learning needs can only be met in a free active atmosphere which tailors the learning environment to the specific needs and abilities of each child. (1973, p. 5)

Contemporary seating plans in English-speaking countries typically consist of groups of children rather than rows. Boydell, in her account of British schools, asserts: "Group seating arrangements and group work seem to be widely regarded as part of the core of good primary practice" (1978, p. 87). Boydell attributes the practice of seating children in groups

and having each group work on a different project to the move towards a child-centered pedagogy that was sanctioned by the Plowden Report of 1967 (1978, p. 87). However Boydell provides several strong criticisms of group seating, such as the possibility that a teacher's methodology may be unaffected by the seating arrangement ; there may not be the shift from whole class to small group instruction even if children are seated in groups. Furthermore the children will not necessarily interact with each other by virtue of the seating plan, because children tend to prefer working in pairs and with members of the same sex. Hence Boydell's conclusion, "successful group learning does not just happen spontaneously given certain organizational arrangements" (1978, p. 103).

In his recent study Alexander notes that in most of the American and English classrooms he observed there was a carpeted meeting area designed for listening to instructions, class discussion or listening to stories (2000, p. 183). Importantly, Alexander describes the trend of creating specific curriculum zones within the classroom. This appears to have been the practice for a considerable time in the United States, and is featured in King's (1964) portrayal of a classroom in the 1950's in which children pursued a variety of activities in their respective groups. According to Alexander individual desks containing students' belongings have given way to tables because of student mobility within the classroom. Instead of being stored at a fixed point belonging to the student, belongings are now stored in units with individual students' trays (2000, p. 184).

In Australia, the New South Wales Department of School Education (1997) provides suggestions for the layout of a Kindergarten classroom (Year One), in which the desks are arranged in three groups in a U shape facing the easel and chalkboard. There is a carpeted space for sitting on

the floor in front of the desks. The easel and chalkboard are arranged so that they are clearly visible from both the carpeted space and the desks.

In contrast, Japanese primary schools are predominantly of a traditional design, featuring separate classrooms with access from a corridor. The floors are not carpeted. The desks tend to be arranged in rows facing the chalkboard. Students' books are stored in the space underneath their desks. Cummings (1980, p. 127) and White (1987, p.18) note that seating plans in Japanese classrooms are flexible and change according to the activity; White observes that desks may be arranged facing the front when attention must be directed to the teacher or slides, in groups when working in the *han* (small group), or in a U shape for a class discussion. Some more recently built schools have been designed with an Open Plan and are carpeted, but these are in the distinct minority.

The Lessons

The Timetable

A notable area of contrast between the schools was the timetable. An important difference was that in the Japanese primary school it was not determined by the teacher and was uniform across the Year One classes, whereas in Australia the teacher had the autonomy to manage the time in the school day. The Australian teacher commented that she was not bound to a particular timetable but rather had the flexibility to create her own timetable as long as there was not too great a contrast with the other teacher of the same level. This indicates the relatively decentralized control in Australian primary schools.

Izumi Primary School

The lessons with a specific literacy focus were *Kokugo* (the National

Language) and *Shosha* (Handwriting). *Kokugo* was held everyday, with double lessons twice a week. *Shosha* was held once a week. Clearly most other parts of the curriculum contained literacy components, although literacy in other subjects was the means rather than the end. Another subject in which children's writing featured prominently was *Seikatsu* (Daily Life).

Cranbrook Christian School

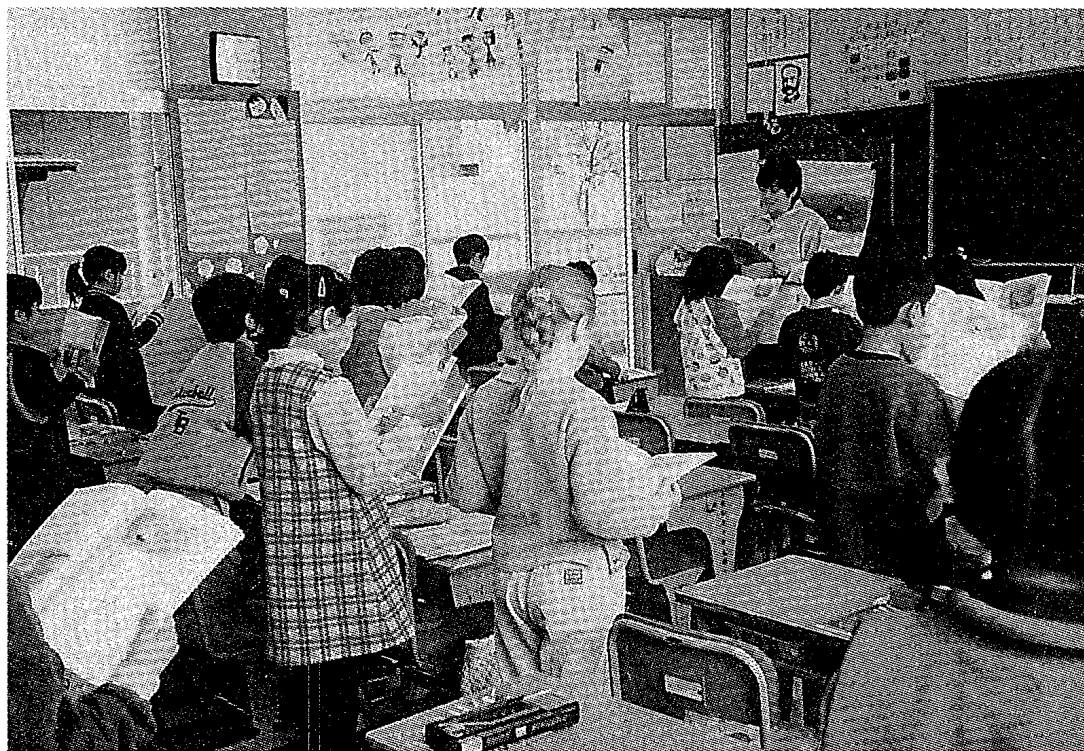
The subjects in the timetable with a literacy component were Story Writing (three times a week), Reading Box (once a week), Phonics (four times a week), Reading (daily), Oral Language (daily), Library (once a week) and Handwriting (three times a week).

Clearly all aspects of the curriculum impact upon literacy education but the areas that will be examined here are reading, handwriting, drama and creative writing.

Reading

Izumi Primary School

Each child had their own textbook, and thus all members of the class progressed through the text at the same pace. There was a different text for the first and second halves of the school year. The texts contained a series of illustrated short stories, with new written characters introduced with each new story. Children stood to read the class text in unison. This seemed an effective way of helping the less able students keep apace with the more accomplished readers. Each day the child had to practise reading the story at home to a parent, who would make a daily record in a special folder.



Children standing to read the text in unison at Izumi Primary School

Cranbrook Christian School

The text, *First Steps* (1997) was developed by The Education Department of Western Australia. *First Steps* is a resource for teachers and thus children did not have their own texts. *First Steps* has been described as “a good example of a popular emergent literacy program” (Hill, 1997, p. 269). Hill describes the emergent perspective as a series of developmental stages that begins with oral language and progresses through to written language. *First Steps* extends the knowledge children already have when they start school, and aims both to develop the skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening in an integrated way, and promote “independent and reflective critical thinking” (Education Department of Western Australia, 1997a, p. 1).

Rather than reading a set textbook at home, each child took home a reader each night that was appropriate for his or her level. There was a range of levels from simple to advanced, and thus it was ideally suited to

a nongraded class. In one of the classes observed there were four students receiving remedial help, and these students' individual needs could be addressed with the system of using *take-home readers*.

In the reading lessons the teacher made frequent use of a 'Big Book', an oversized book designed to be shared by the whole class. One advantage of the Big Book was the ease of keeping the class focused on the same part of the text at the same time, particularly important in a nongraded class which had a range of reading levels. The use of a pointer to indicate the part of the text the teacher was reading helped focus the attention of the class.

Handwriting

Izumi Primary School

The complexity of writing Japanese is due to the sheer number of characters, the three writing systems that must be mastered and the typically greater number of strokes per character than the letters of the alphabet. Hence in the Japanese classroom significantly more attention was directed to the details of written presentation, such as how to fill up the space in each square, and the force and manner used to terminate different strokes. For example, there are three kinds of force to be applied to different characters: (1) *tome*- the stroke stops abruptly, (2) *hane*- the end of the stroke flicks up, and (3) *harai*- the stroke gently tapers off. Furthermore there were detailed and frequent instructions regarding posture, the correct distance between the child and the desk, and how to position the book on the desk.

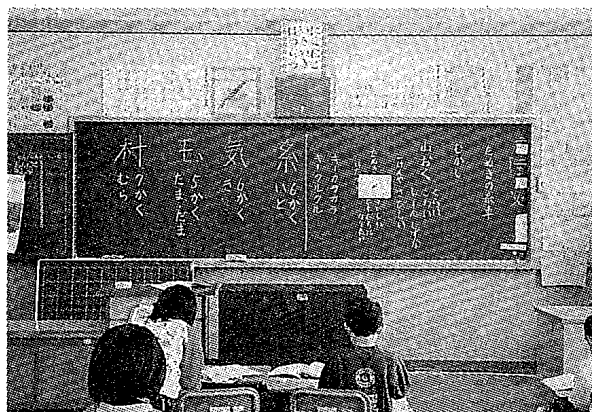
Calligraphy was practised in the second term, and children were instructed to bring a special pen to school. Children practised writing New

Year's greetings known as *kakizome*, and certificates were awarded to children who had performed particularly well.

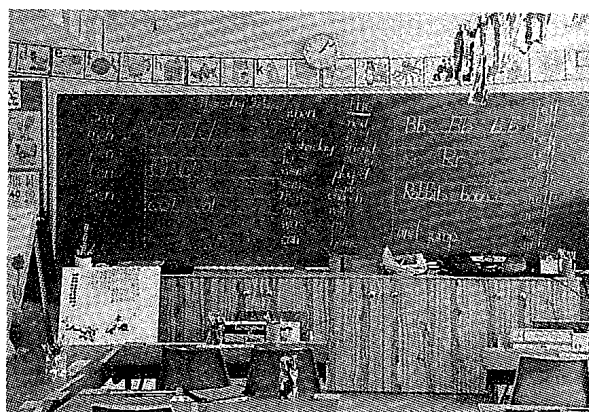
Handwriting exercises were regularly set for homework, and consisted of copying characters into the prescribed spaces in squares, and later copying sentences into a special exercise book (*moji no keiko*).

Cranbrook Christian School

Handwriting in the Australian classroom concentrated on details such as the position of holding the pencil, using a finger space between words, the position of where to start writing each letter, the direction of writing the letters, and the proportions of each part of the letter. The teacher taught handwriting to Reception and Year One children separately, and used different sides of the board to demonstrate the task for each level. The teacher helped them develop eye-finger co-ordination with finger exercises such as 'Incy Wincy Spider'. There was no written homework at this level.



Izumi Primary School



Cranbrook Christian School

Drama

Izumi Primary School

Drama was an important part of the school curriculum and Year One children performed in the class, for the whole school and for the Year Six

children at the end of the academic year before they graduated. Class performances were regularly put on for parents on Parent Observation Days. Students wore specially made costumes and delivered their lines in synchrony. Dance, singing and movement were important features of the performance. Younger students delivered their lines in pairs. Teachers' roles were behind the scenes ; all speaking parts were delivered by students. On the final Parent Observation Day in March it was striking to note the confidence the children had developed in reading and speaking before their peers and parents.

A lesson was observed in which students reenacted a story from their *Kokugo* text. Pictures of the characters the students were representing were worn as 'hats', fastened to a band of paper around their heads. After the performance the students watching the play raised their hands and gave positive feedback about the performance of their peers. Then two more groups performed the play, this time squatting behind the desk at the front of the room and holding a picture of the character they were representing above the desk. The students read their lines from the back of the picture, thus combining the activities of reading and performing. Student participation was maximized because they were involved in both performance and feedback.

Cranbrook Christian School

Drama was regularly incorporated into the reading lessons. One such lesson began with Reception children sitting on the carpet. The teacher reminded the students of the story of the Three Little Pigs, questioned them on the story and then had them act it out. She then told them to sit in a square and asked for a volunteer for the part of the wolf. The children practised the wolf's lines: "Little pig, little pig, let me in", and the pig's

lines: "No, no, not by the hair of my chinny chin chin. I will not let you in". Two children representing the wolf sat outside of the square, and two representing the pig sat inside the square, and thus they reenacted the story. The carpeted floor space was ideal for dramatic activities of this sort.

Creative Writing

Izumi Primary School

Creative writing was not formalized in the curriculum as a discrete subject area but it certainly was an important activity in the Japanese classroom. Children's compositions were filed in a special folder.

According to the teacher creative writing was taught in four stages:

1. Students wrote in speech bubbles which accompanied a picture (*fukidashi*).

The use of speech bubbles required the students to identify with a character from a story in the textbook and describe how they might be feeling.

2. A Picture Diary (*enikki*)

During the summer holiday students had to create a picture diary. The report of each student's summer holidays was then posted at the rear of the classroom. This consisted of an illustration with an accompanying report written vertically underneath. The date, weather and student's name were written vertically on the right hand side. The teacher had written encouraging feedback on the report.

3. A Short Composition (*tansakubun*)

The short composition consisted of a story written on eighty squares of graph paper with an illustration in a space at the top of the page and the date, the title of the story and the child's name written vertically on the

right.

4. Composition (*sakubun*)

The most difficult exercise was the composition, and thus was done in Term Three at the end of the academic year. This was written on standard Japanese graph paper used for writing compositions, called *genko yoshi*. The expected length was four hundred characters. The use of paragraphing had been introduced but not all students were expected to achieve this at this stage.

The introduction to writing compositions was thus very gradual. Peak's assertion that new learning situations are characterized by "a long period of diligent study and thorough mastery of precisely defined basic routines before the student is engaged in the medium itself" (1986, p.113-114) seems to be borne out in the present observation of the teaching of composition.

Composing Haiku

Haiku is a three lined poem consisting of a first line of five syllables, a second line of seven syllables and a third line of five syllables. The art of writing haiku demands the use of creativity within a prescribed structure. Children of all year levels composed haiku, including those in Year One after only three months at school. Haiku composition was practised at regular intervals during the year and reflected seasonal events, which served to heighten children's perceptions of the changing seasons. The school had a Haiku Club, and Haiku Day was held in June. Haiku newsletters were regularly published during the year, featuring selected haiku composed by children from different year levels. The three Year One children's haiku published in the July Haiku Newsletter were as follows:

Amenohiwa nagagutsuhaite osampoda (Miyako)

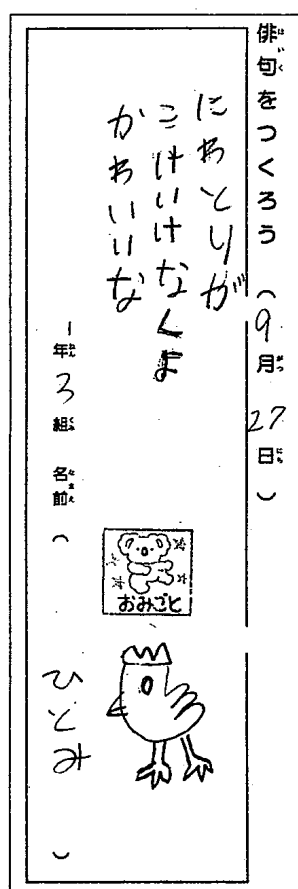
'On a rainy day I put on my Wellington boots and go for a walk.'

Katatsumuri kaminarikiite hikkonda (Shizuka)

'The snail heard the thunder and retreated to its shell.'

Asagaoga dondonnobite ureshiina (Ellie)

'I'm happy to see my morning glory growing.'



This is an example of the original format used by Japanese children.

'The rooster crows Cock-a-doodle-doo. It's very cute.' (Hitomi)

Cranbrook Christian School

The fact that Story Writing existed as a discrete subject and that students had exercises books specifically for this subject indicates the importance of creative composition from the early years.

The teacher explained the following sequence for Story Writing during Terms One and Two of Reception:

Children started with a blank scrapbook.

1. The students drew a picture and the teacher wrote a sentence describing it.
2. The students drew a picture, the teacher wrote a sentence describing it and the students traced the teacher's writing.
3. The students drew, the teacher wrote the sentence and the students copied the teacher's writing.
4. The students wrote unaided.

In Term Three the students progressed to lined books.

The students had a book called "My Dictionary" which they consulted when they needed to know the correct spelling of a word used in their story. The book was arranged in alphabetical order with letters in upper and lower case at the top of the page. Commonly used words appeared on each page. There were spaces for them to enter other new words. At the back of the dictionary words were arranged in themes such as "Food and Drinks" and "At the Beach".

Story Writing as a Class: The Big Book

An important feature of the Australian class was story writing on a collective level. The story of the Big Book formed the basis for text innovation, in which children created a Big Book as a class, modeling their own story on a previous story they had read from the Big Book. All the children's names were recorded on the first page. It was a detailed and complex story, with children's illustrations on each page. Big books made by the class serve many functions: "The activities require students to discuss, write, retell in correct sequence and demonstrate understanding of the original text" (Education Department of Western Australia, 1997b, p. 23).

This principle of creativity within a defined structure is also at work

when Japanese students compose haiku.

Story Maps

The Australian classroom made frequent use of a visual representation of the story known as a 'Story Map'. The children assisted the teacher to draw the story map on the blackboard, and then used the map as a means of retelling the story to their partner. Children also created their own story maps on small individual blackboards and in their scrapbooks, and used this to recount their stories to other members of the class. Hence the knowledge of the story was reinforced both visually and orally.

Writing-A comparison of emphases

Japanese and English speakers' attitudes to early writing exhibit a striking contrast regarding the relative priority placed on accuracy versus self-expression. It is difficult to simultaneously write both accurately and creatively. It is here that the difference in attitude by practitioners in Japan and Australia is most apparent. Hill describes the text being used in the class observed in this study, the Writing Developmental Continuum (Education Department of Western Australia, 1997a) as being representative of the "emergent perspective":

Children emerge as readers and writers through immersion in and experiences with print that encourages engagement, experimentation and risk-taking. Invented spellings and approximations are accepted as part of the learner's on-going process of making sense and gaining control over literacy Formal direct instruction, particularly the teaching of isolated skills and worksheets, are seen as inappropriate for young children. (1997, p. 268)


In the Writing Developmental Continuum teachers are advised:

Teachers who expect that writing should always be neat and accurate may discourage writers who are trying to make sense of the systems of language. This can lead to children refusing to write independently or only writing words they can spell or becoming safe unimaginative writers. (Education Department of Western Australia, 1997a, p. 42)

Clearly this attitude is not confined to Australia. Alexander notes a display on a classroom wall in a primary school in Michigan, USA, of some slogans including the following: "Celebrating approximation vs celebrating perfection" (2000, p. 548). In the English-speaking classroom, risk-taking is regarded as an essential component of creativity, and thus is nurtured from the earliest stages of learning to write. Harste et al. argue: "Without risk there can be no discovery of the generative potentials of literacy. Overemphasis on the maintenance aspects of language discourages risk" (1984, p. 132). Rowe and Edwards recommend pre-writing so that children learn to focus on content rather than form. They criticize the common perception that neatness is of prime importance: "'Nice work' and 'Beautiful writing' are common teacher responses but not very helpful" (2001, p. 17).

In this Anglo-western approach the process is regarded as more important than the final product. This is in contrast to the Japanese classroom: "[A] consequence of the emphasis on perfection was a focus on the form of a message or communication rather than on its meaning. It seemed to us that so much attention was paid to perfection of every detail that little attempt was made to deduce the meaning whenever the message was

02 JUL 2001.

On the weekend /
 I went to /
 Jason's party.
 After church
 I had fun
 At Jason's
 house 
 I liked to go
 up stairs.
 upstairs

Steven, Reception, Botany Primary School (a pseudonymous name). A private school in South Australia

On the weekend I went to Jason's party. After church I had fun at Jason's house. I liked to go upstairs.

3-7-01
 9. The sun and the moon had a fight.
 ① The sun and the moon were best friends until they had a fight. There was a girl ^{called} Emily. The moon ^{because the sun pushed it onto the ground.} broke. Emily found it. She put a bandaid ^{aid} on it. ② But the next day the moon broke ^{again} and the girl was sorry for it. ③ She went to bed ^{again} and the next day the moon was gone. ④ It was good friends ^{again} with the sun. the end. ⑤

April, Year One, Flinders Primary School (a pseudonymous name). A private school in South Australia

The sun and the moon had a fight. The sun and the moon were best friends until they had a fight. There was a girl called Emily. The moon broke and Emily found it. She put a bandaid on it. But the next day the moon broke again and the girl was sorry for it. So she went to bed again and the next day the moon was gone. It was good friends again with the sun. The end.

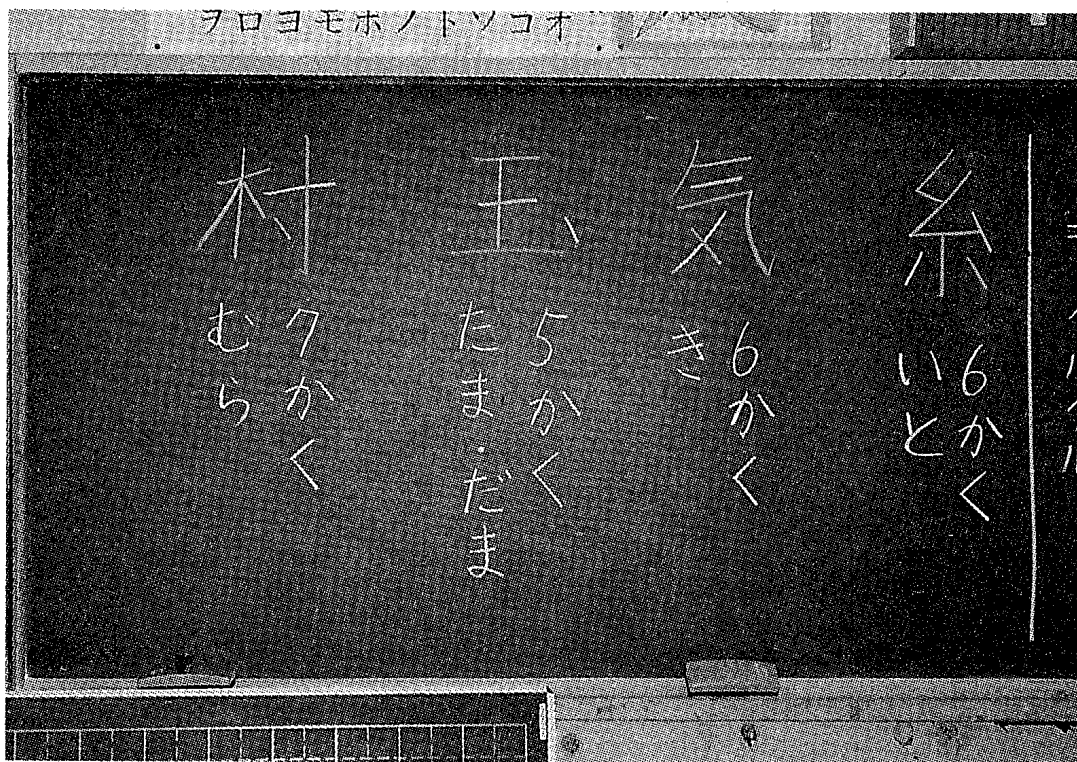
imperfectly worded" (Conduit and Conduit, 1996, p.63). The native English-speaking observer is struck by the frequent use of the eraser by Japanese children. A Japanese child is alerted to the error by the teacher, erases it and rewrites the correction. Hence accuracy and precision are accorded great importance.

The children's writings above reveal this distinction between the priorities of free self-expression and accurate expression. The Australian children's writings contain many spelling mistakes. These have been corrected but their work is considered to be successful. The Japanese children's writings have received positive comments and are also considered to be successful. There are no corrections although it appears that an eraser has been used, at least in the first composition. Children in Japanese classrooms would tend to erase and correct a mistake than ignore it in the interests of pursuing a story.

Form versus content

Another important inter-language difference is that in the Japanese class calligraphy is taught and thus writing is practised as an end in itself, whereas modern English writing is typically functional and thus simply serves as a means to an end. This highlights the relative importance attached to form and content. In Japan form is highly valued in a general sense. The saying *katachi kara hairimasu* 'Form comes first' succinctly expresses this. In contrast English speakers are exhorted to look beyond 'mere form'; this attitude is epitomized by sayings such as 'Don't judge a book by its cover', and 'a rough diamond'. This general difference in outlook may explain the relative emphases on the medium and the message in the writing in Japanese and English speaking classrooms.

However this difference in the frequency of errors is probably at least partly due to orthographic differences. Difficulties in writing Japanese and English are of different orders. The chief difficulties of writing Japanese are the number and complexity of the characters, whereas the chief difficulties of English are the irregularities of the spelling and to a lesser extent, punctuation. The alphabet has considerably fewer and simpler written symbols than Japanese, and does not require the same investment of time as learning to write Japanese. Japanese characters become increasingly complex and more numerous as children progress through primary and secondary school, whereas the alphabet is mastered by the first year of school. Arguably, because of the increasing difficulty of Japanese characters, errors cannot be tolerated in the early stages. As Benjamin argues, "Accurate and legible handwriting in Japan are not only a matter of art and aesthetics, but also of practical necessity" (1997, p. 251).



Year One characters on the chalkboard at Izumi Primary School.

Written English is characterized by spelling irregularities, which are evidenced from the very earliest stages of literacy. The greater frequency of errors in children's writing in English may not simply be because of the tolerance of errors according to the teaching philosophy, but also because the irregularities of English spelling mean that English is a more complex writing system than Japanese in the early stages.

Concluding Remarks

The principal differences between the Japanese and Australian methodologies of teaching early literacy to emerge from this small-scale study are the approach to student diversity, the degree of formality of classroom organization and the relative importance attached to risk-taking versus accuracy.

A similarity concerning the management of individual differences between the Japanese and Australian classroom is the use of peer support. Japanese classes typically feature the use of the *han*, comprising children of a range of complementary abilities and skills. In Australia peer support is a feature of the nongraded class. Classroom practices which are created in response to individual differences in Australia but not in Japan include the nongraded class, the LAP programme, education for Indigenous students, education for gifted and talented students and the use of basal readers instead of a set text. Japanese children achieve literacy targets as a class whereas the Australian children frequently work on individual programmes. Perhaps this style of organization accounts for the wide range of literacy attainment in Australia, and the consistent expectations of Japanese children account for the more clustered levels of literacy attainment in Japan.

The Japanese classroom has a relatively formal atmosphere, with the

students typically sitting in rows facing the blackboard. The seating arrangement in the Australian classroom is typically grouped or U-shaped. Seating in the Japanese classroom is exclusively at desks whereas in Australia there is an additional carpeted space for children to sit on the floor. Similarities include the use of groupwork, and the rich displays of student work around the classroom.

One of the major differences that emerge from this study is the relative importance attached to risk-taking and accuracy. The Anglo-western approach values risk-taking as a means to develop self-expression, whereas the Japanese approach values precision and accuracy. This difference is probably partly attributable to orthographic differences between Japanese and English. The former necessitates more attention to detail because of its greater complexity. A lack of precision in English writing may be easier to tolerate because it is ultimately a simpler orthographic system, and because of the expectation that most children can master written conventions at a later stage. Correction of children's errors in a simpler orthographic system such as English can be provided gradually at no detriment to the child's progress, whereas a more complex writing system offers no such luxury. Compounding the complexity of this comparison is the fact that English is relatively difficult in the early stages because of the irregularities of spelling, and a demand for total accuracy by teachers would hinder some children from focusing on content. The question of the degree to which the relative priorities placed on accuracy or risk-taking are due to cultural preferences or necessitated by orthographic differences between Japanese and English merits further investigation.

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(附記)

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