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Discussion-Based Pedagogy to Promote to Socioemotional Learning and Well-Being Among Students in Japan

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Abstract

The Japanese educational system is highly competitive and applies high stakes standardized admission testing. As this approach has led to student stress and a narrow instructional focus, the Japanese Government revised educational goals toward more holistic development of well-rounded citizens who are healthy, independent, creative, and work collaboratively with others. However, many teachers did not know how to promote these new goals. This study investigated Japanese educators’ application of Philosophy for Children, a discussion-based inquiry approach that has been used to promote socioemotional learning and well-being. Methods included email communications with 29 educators, analysis of Japanese language documents related to the approach in Japan, and observations of meetings of educators who used the method. Educators applied the approach to elementary, secondary, and university settings. The approach was used to promote socioemotional learning and critical thinking among Japanese children. Some have used the approach to facilitate children's healing after the Tōhoku earthquake and other trauma. Facilitators applied the approach outside of the classroom in public settings like train stations to promote everyday citizens’ expression and understanding. The results suggest that Philosophy for Children has the potential to promote holistic goals for children and adults.

Background and Rationale

The Japanese educational system is competitive and uses standardized tests to determine secondary school placement, which in turn determines students' college and career options (Kuramoto & Koizumi, 2018). Such an approach is limiting and excludes broader goals of well-being and development (Ng & Wong, 2020). High-stakes testing is associated with students' stress and high suicide rates in Japan, where suicide is the primary cause of death for individuals beginning at age 10 (Kawabe et al., 2016).

More than 20 years ago, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, ([MEXT], 1998) expressed concern about the education system's emotional toll:

> Excessive examination competition has emerged as educational aspirations have risen, and the problems of bullying, school refusal, and juvenile crime have become extremely serious. It cannot be denied that to date in Japan, education has tended to fall into the trap of cramming knowledge into children, while neglecting the ability to learn and think for oneself (para 8).

MEXT acknowledged the existence of *hikikomori*, a phenomenon where students quit going to school and shut themselves in their rooms to avoid school-related pressure. The Japanese government reported that 541,000 people aged 15-39 withdrew from society, staying at home for more than six months (Tajan et al., 2017). In response, the government revised its educational objectives to develop more holistic goals including: (a) creativity, independence, and responsibility; (b) collaboration, mutual respect, and contributions to local and global communities; and (c) positive attitudes toward learning, health, justice, the environment, Japanese culture, and world peace (MEXT, 2009).

However, policy makers provided little guidance to teachers who generally did not know how to implement these goals (Ono, 2014). Although teachers had flexibility to design their own lessons, many were unsure about how to promote these more holistic goals, particularly because they still needed to prepare students for admissions testing (Ikesako & Miyamoto, 2015).

Socioemotional Learning

Much of the curricula for socioemotional learning (SEL) in Japan generated from the US. Koizumi (2005) translated into Japanese what the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) published about SEL. CASEL defines SEL as processes through which students "acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions" (Elias et al., 1997, p. 5).

Some Japanese educators have used *Philosophy for Children* (P4C), a discussion-based inquiry approach designed to promote logical thinking and students' SEL (Brandt 1998; Sharp et al., 1992). The purpose of this paper is to describe how Japanese elementary, secondary, and university educators have used P4C and its effects.

Philosophy for Children

One of the key features of P4C is children's search for meaning because like everyone else, children desire a life of rich and meaningful experiences (Lipman et al., 1980). Rather than using textbooks to tell children what to think, P4C activities are meaning-laden: stories, games, discussions, and relationship-building. Lipman created P4C after noticing that college students often lacked adequate reasoning skills. He thought that philosophical education for children could remedy this and wrote instructional novels that depicted characters discovering philosophical principles (Brandt, 1998).

P4C transforms the classroom environment into a community of inquiry that is logic-based, open to evidence, and assumes these processes become reflective habits (Lipman et al., 1980). Prerequisite conditions include participants' mutual respect for each other, readiness to reason together, and absence of indoctrination. P4C involves discovering new possibilities by listening to and discussing issues with those who have different backgrounds and perspectives. P4C establishes a community of inquiry, encourages participation, and reduces competition. For more than 50 years, authors have published thousands of books and articles on P4C in different countries (Gregory, 2011); however, most literature on P4C in Japan is written in the Japanese language and has not been accessible to those unable to read Japanese texts.

Educators have adapted P4C to fit their specific needs and contexts. For example, Jackson (2012) developed P4C Hawai‘i, distinguishing between the "Big P" of traditional academic philosophy and the "little p" of everyday philosophy. The latter reflects everyone's natural capacity for wonder as they engage in philosophical inquiry (Makaiau & Miller, 2012). The P4C Hawai‘i approach does not use Lipman's P4C novels. Instead, children sit in a large circle, nominate topics that they are interested in discussing, and vote on what they want to discuss. The P4C facilitators emphasize intellectual and emotional safety (Leng, 2020).

Dewey's Approach

The current study was framed by Dewey's (1915) approach which emphasizes the significance of experience in learning and argued that schools should not just teach content, but also engage students in activities to learn how to live in society. Dewey's conceptualization of education focused on meaningful activity in learning and participation in a classroom democracy. Dewey asserted that the school community should promote shared interests among peers. P4C connects with Dewey's (1938) ideas by emphasizing students' investment in learning, active participation and complex understanding of subjects. The current study examined the perspectives of Japanese educators and Japanese language texts regarding how Japanese educators have used P4C. Our research questions were: (a) How have Japanese educators applied P4C? and (b) What were the effects of its application on students in these settings?

Methods

Participants

Participants included 29 elementary and middle school teachers and professors. The educators implemented P4C across Japan.

Data Sources

The first author corresponded with participants through email about P4C in Japan, their purposes in conducting P4C, their specific approaches, and outcomes related to its use. These email communications were conducted in Japanese. In addition, we examined 103 Japanese journal articles, 14 Japanese books, an unpublished dissertation on P4C (Tsuchiya, 2018), manuscripts submitted for publication (Toyoda, 2021), 12 Japanese websites, a P4C newsletter, meeting minutes of a Japanese P4C organization, and a teacher's notes about implementing the practices. In 2016 and 2017, the first author observed and took field notes at two meetings of P4C Japan, an organization of educators who used the P4C Hawai‘i approach.

Data Analysis

The first author coded the data regarding: (a) early historical influences of P4C in Japan, (b) the approaches used, (c) who participated in the activities, (d) goals for using P4C, and (d) its effects. We triangulated results across different data sources.

Results

Introduction of P4C in Japan

P4C in Japan originated in 1993, when Ando and Watanabe suggested that philosophy programs for children could improve social studies and English education in Japan (Tsuchiya, 2018; Sakai, 2013). In 1998, Osaka University (2010) established a laboratory to study philosophical education for teachers, nurses, and other community members. Matsumoto (2004) and colleagues at Hyogo University developed a curriculum for fifth grade students in Miyazaki prefecture and used Lipman's novel, *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery*, to promote and assess children's inferential skills.

Influences of p4c Hawai‘i

Jackson's work on P4C Hawai‘i appeared to be especially influential in shaping the direction of Japanese philosophical inquiry with children. With funding from the Uehiro Foundation, Jackson and colleagues at the University of Hawai‘i hosted and participated in exchanges of educators from Hawai‘i, Japan, and other countries, to share ideas about P4C (University of Hawai‘i Uehiro Academy, 2013).

Toyoda coordinated the P4C Japan-Hawai‘i Exchange Program that provided biannual activities for teachers from Japan and Hawai‘i to learn about P4C Hawai‘i (Uehiro Foundation on Ethics and Education, 2004). Toyoda learned about P4C while she was a graduate student at the University of Hawai‘i (Toyoda, interview). In 2005, she introduced the P4C Hawai‘i approach to Japanese audiences at a workshop and began holding P4C workshops at elementary schools throughout Japan. In 2010, she introduced the P4C Hawai‘i approach at universities in Japan. In

2013, Toyoda introduced P4C to an elementary school in Miyagi prefecture and facilitated a monthly P4C Hawai‘i study group.

Godo (2013) observed P4C as a graduate student in Hawai‘i. Upon returning to Japan, she was a tutor in a philosophy camp for high school students. Godo was amazed that students were so honest, considered others’ questions seriously, and felt accepted. She noted that "in such a way, a camp where people are connected and freely grow through philosophy felt like a utopia to me" (Godo, 2013, p. 68).

Formal Education

A group of K-12 and higher education teachers from institutions mostly in Osaka created “P4C Japan.” This group studied and promoted P4C Hawai‘i methods by writing articles, and sharing lesson plans and other materials (P4C Japan, 2018). At a 2016 meeting, a teacher shared a lesson plan and questions that it generated from students, while attendees offered feedback. As of 2019, the group discontinued their activities; however, their website remains as a resource. Another group of educators created P4C in Schools KANSAI-JAPAN (2020), an organization that introduces and uses P4C in schools.

Educators at Ochasho University Elementary School applied a P4C approach for Grades 3-6 students (Tanaka, 2017). The Japanese government designated Ochasho and several other schools as sites to investigate the integration of critical thinking and humanities education. Ochasho educators chose P4C Hawai‘i as their approach.

A study of P4C Hawai‘i in a Japanese middle school found that it positively influenced middle school students’ SEL (Author). A Japanese language teacher applied the approach weekly, and results indicated that students learned about themselves and classmates and developed interpersonal and decision-making skills.

Emphasis on Healing

Some educators used P4C in Japan to facilitate healing after trauma. “Clinical Philosophy,” developed by Washida, addresses suffering in fields including education and medicine, and promotes philosophical reflection about events in people’s lives (Osaka University, 2010). In 1998, Washida and colleagues initiated a course in clinical philosophy on “caring” for teachers, nurses, and other professionals. As a result, graduate students studied reclusive *hikikomori* students and applied P4C with high schoolers.

Educators used the P4C Hawai’i approach to address trauma after the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami. They conducted P4C Hawai‘i in an elementary school in Sendai, a region affected by the disaster, and students demonstrated social and emotional expression to a degree not usually seen in other classrooms (Shoji & Horikoshi, 2015). One of the students whose turn it was to speak did not say anything; and yet, he did not want to pass his turn. After 30 seconds, he started expressing his thoughts. A girl with family issues who did not usually express her feelings became talkative. One student who had refused to come to school returned and participated in P4C. He told others that he enjoyed the discussion and wanted to do it again.

Tabata (2016) explained that P4C had a counseling-like effect for students. Those who participated in the sessions felt close to each other and demonstrated prosocial behaviors. An elementary school teacher shared that through P4C, she could hear the students' "real voices" and better know how to support them.

Located in Miyagi prefecture, another site of the 2011 earthquake, P4C Miyagi aimed to help children affected by natural disasters. The group worked to implement school goals, resolve regional, school, and classroom problems, and build a learning community among educators (Miyagi University, 2018). They modeled their activities on the P4C Hawai'i approach introduced by Toyoda (Tabata, 2016).

Community Outreach

Some Japanese educators have used P4C in non-school contexts. The University of Tokyo promoted "Philosophy for Everyone." They collaborated with schools and other organizations to hold events for people of different ages and backgrounds in locations throughout Japan (Kajitani, 2016). Café Philo (2016) sponsored philosophical conversations about everyday life among community participants. Since 2005, the group has operated the Philosophy Café, which offered P4C discussions in public locations, such as neighborhood cafes and train stations. Upon request, Café Philo dispatched a facilitator to create a customized dialogue for participants. For example, after viewing a movie, participants discussed their impressions of the film and the issues raised.

Founded in 2015, the Japanese Association for Philosophical Practice (2022) promoted practices that fostered intellectual exchange. Ardacoda, a nonprofit organization in Tokyo, offered workshops for children and adults interested in philosophical dialogue. Its members held discussion-events in public venues, businesses, and the media. According to Deputy Director Kono (2014), Ardacoda's P4C was flexible, but generally applied Lipman's approach, using a book to stimulate dialogue.

Discussion

In revising their nation's educational goals, the Japanese government focused on more holistic goals for students (Japanese Prime Minister's Office, 2015). Key educational objectives include developing students' abilities to question and problem solve, understand themselves and others, demonstrate leadership and communication skills, and participate in global communities that include diverse values and viewpoints. In order to accomplish these goals, the Government stated that teachers should hold high expectations for all children and promote their self-esteem and aspirations. These statements indicated that policy makers recognize that education requires the development of SEL that is not assessed by standardized tests (MEXT, 2011). Japanese policymakers were concerned about *hikkikomori* and high youth suicide rates (MEXT, 1998; Tajan et al., 2017) and recognized the role that schools play in developing SEL (MEXT, 2015).

In this study, we found that Japanese educators have used P4C to address these holistic goals. P4C outcomes reported in this study were similar to previous research indicating that the approach can improve SEL. Siddiqui et al. (2019) studied students in 16 elementary schools in England whose teachers received P4C professional development. Compared to other peers,

students whose teachers used P4C had stronger social and emotional skills, particularly when the children lived in poverty. Madrid (2008) also found that P4C was effective in engaging children and adults who lived in extreme poverty in Mexico. P4C may provide a space for self-expression and sharing among those who are traumatized. Using P4C with such individuals in Japan may promote positive mental health in a country where such issues are often stigmatized (Ando et al., 2013).

Ibasho and Kizuna

Ibasho is an everyday concept with cultural nuances that has been applied to educational and clinical fields (Fujiwara, 2010; Obata & Ito, 2001). Nakamura (1998) defined *ibasho* as the physical and psychological space that serves as the basis of everyday activities and the creation of interpersonal relationships. It is the place where one can feel safe (Toyota & Okamura, 2001) and "be as one is" (Ishimoto, 2009, p.7). In the current study, educators described how P4C created *ibasho* in the classroom by creating emotionally and intellectually safe environments for students to express their ideas and even disagree, without fear of failure or repudiation. Nurturing *ibasho* through P4C may influence students to be more creative, productive, and happier. This is important, given that a comparison across 20 different countries found that Japanese adolescents were the least happy (Varkey Foundation, 2017). Only 28% of Japanese youth, ages 15-21 reported being happy, compared to 59% across all countries.

The Japanese concept of *kizuna* (social ties) is also relevant. P4C emphasizes intellectual, social, and emotional engagement (Jackson, 2019) and has the potential to build *kizuna* in an increasingly isolated and depersonalized Japan (MEXT, 2018). Jones (2012) suggested that schools should provide students with opportunities to express their thoughts and feelings and learn to work with others constructively. The results of this study suggest that P4C may create and maintain *kizuna* in a society where so many people feel isolated and also choose *hikikomori* and suicide in response to unhappiness.

Reflections on Dewey

Dewey (1916) believed that schools should promote shared interests among peers and open communication. In his view, the ideal school was a miniature democracy in which children learned how to live in society (Dewey, 1915). The results of the current study were consistent with these ideas. Although we began this study focused on K-12 education, we were surprised to find examples of educators applying P4C in creative ways outside of the classroom in everyday settings like train stations (Kajitani, 2016). We assume that those who participated in these community events did not experience P4C as students. That these community members were interested in participating in P4C suggests that students who experience P4C in school may be in ideal positions to use P4C throughout their lives.

Applying P4C in the classroom, teachers help students to think independently and critically, understand themselves and others, and work collaboratively toward mutual goals. In discussing their feelings and ideas, students listen to others who have different opinions. All of these skills are related to Dewey's goal of students' acquiring the skills needed to comprehend what it means to be valued members of a social group. Dewey (1933) believed that individuals should be able

to explore new ideas without judgment or bias and doing so would cultivate their interests in learning. Dewey (1938) claimed that educators should encourage students to choose what they learn and explore the consequences of their actions. Educators in the current study moved away from the traditional model of education, in which students passively learn what the teacher instructs. Instead, students played freely with ideas among their peers and teachers without assumptions and preconceptions.

Limitations and Future Research

This study was limited by review of Japanese publications and websites and relatively short email correspondence with participants. Using email correspondence is different from face-to-face, video, or phone interviews. Email is asynchronous, so we could not follow up on participants' responses immediately or probe in ways that are possible through synchronous communication. Rather, respondents had more time to reflect on our questions before they wrote back, perhaps phrasing what they wrote in ways that were socially desirable or reflecting what they thought we wanted to hear. Overall, we were able to achieve a broad sketch of the ways that Japanese educators were using P4C in and outside of K-12 Japanese classrooms, but were limited in the amount of detail we received about particular programs and classroom interventions.

Finally, the information we gathered about P4C in Japan was mostly from the perspectives of those who facilitated or observed the P4C sessions, rather than from the students' and other participants. Future research can contribute to this literature by focusing on Japanese students' and other participants' perspectives of their P4C experiences and outcomes. We also suggest longitudinal studies of the effects of P4C in Japan and further investigation of applications in non-school settings.

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