
Democracy and History Education

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1. Diversification of Japanese Society and History Education

There are now many foreign citizens living in Japan who do not have Japanese nationality¹. Moreover, according to the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, Japan's food self-sufficiency rate in 2006 was 39% based on calories, which means that Japan depends on other countries for the remaining 61% of its food. Thus, the Japanese economy is now supported by foreigners, and Japanese people are dependent on other countries for food. This dependence is not unique to Japan; most countries depend on others to a greater or lesser extent.

In these global times, the education system should encourage people to share their lives and local society in which they live with others. In history education, children should not simply learn about their own country's culture but also learn how to introduce it to other countries. Specifically, children should be made aware of their identity and differences in societies and cultures through their own experience of life.

Historically, Japan has emphasized peace and democracy. After waging an aggressive war in the early 20th century, Japan renounced war in its constitution, and has not been involved in any war or conflict for more than 60 years now. In politics too, democracy based on elections is a guiding principle. The role of history education is to make students aware of these characteristics of the country.

Therefore, Japanese schools have focused on a democratic approach: children are encouraged to express their views in class, and schools that produce children who are able to do so are highly evaluated. This approach creates the school culture², and such history education starts in elementary school.

2. Discussion during History Class as Part of Social Studies

In a democratic society, education should teach the importance of

democracy and develop citizens who can act democratically based on the principle of democracy³. How should teachers foster such awareness and ability to act?

The first step is discussion. Democracy involves finding solutions through discussions among many people. We should not separate democracy and discussion when we teach. But what kinds of activities should the discussion involve during history classes?

To encourage discussion among children, there must be different opinions from different perspectives, or hypotheses, and the teacher must respect different views. Often, children cannot express their views logically, and require courage to go against the consensus opinion. Therefore, teachers should use their ingenuity in class to reduce the psychological pressure on children who wish to express unorthodox opinions.

One approach is to put children into pairs sitting next to each other or into small groups of about four, and so speak their opinions within the pair or group⁴. Then, one of the pair should speak before all the children, with the other child providing supporting opinions. This method of classwork is effective. When a child speaks on behalf of a group, it is important to encourage the other children of the group to provide support, by giving them opportunities to provide additional opinions or explanations. Also, it is effective to instruct the children to make unique comments that are not the opinion of the group. By encouraging students to create the group's own discovery or hypothesis, they will gain the independence required for subsequent learning activities.

When conducting such activities, teachers must not make judgments on whether the children's opinions are good or bad; that is for the children themselves to decide. If the teacher states that an opinion is good in advance, then other children who have different views cannot express their views. Even when a child gives a correct opinion or hypothesis, the teacher should ask the children to present different views by asking them whether they agree with the opinion, for example. For minority opinions in particular, the teacher should not simply ignore or criticize them⁵.

For logical discussion, it is crucial to ensure that children give reasons for their opinions or hypotheses. To avoid emotional conflict, teachers must ask children who do not give such reasons to repeat their opinions or to explain the reasons. This will teach children to speak logically with a solid foundation. Children can use appropriate data to support their opinions, such as maps, statistical data, and textbooks, and where appropriate, can be given opportunities to do field work by themselves as part of a social studies field trip or holiday assignment. Newspaper articles and books can also serve as

materials, but the teachers should not merely provide such materials, but should show the students where they can obtain the materials⁶. These learning activities are valuable, since history classes are a part of social studies for developing the social skills that children will need. Next, we look at some specific activities.

3. Activity Model for Democratic Deep Thinking in History Class as Part of Social Studies

Examples of history activities for developing the ability to act as a democratic citizen are given below.

Learning Activity Model 1: “Various ways of interpretation”

This model encourages children to realize that history can be interpreted in many ways.

- [1] The teacher prepares a picture or illustration to show people's lives in a certain era (textbook materials may be used).
- [2] Children choose several characters or scenes in which they are interested from the picture and mark these.
- [3] Each group or pair of children chooses a scene that they think other groups are unlikely to choose.
- [4] The children in each group consider and write an “explanation about the likelihood” and “explanation about the unlikelihood” about the scene they have chosen, and add a title that conveys their explanation (Thesis of x).
- [5] Each group presents two hypotheses (interpretations).
- [6] The children compare the group hypotheses presented in the class and classify them by similarity.
- [7] The entire class asks questions and discusses the credibility of each hypothesis.
- [8] Each group examines the credibility of the group hypothesis, and presents it after examination. Particularly, each group clarifies differences or common points between its own hypothesis and the hypotheses of other groups.
- [9] The most likely theory is selected through class discussion (majority vote).
- [10] The children in each group discuss what they have learned or not learned through the activity, as well as what abilities they have used or developed (using their own words such as an ability to do x).

Learning Activity Model 2: “Treasures from the past”

- [1] Each child puts an item he/she treasures in a bag and all the children in the class exchange them with the other children.

- [2] Each child opens the bag, guesses who is the owner of each item, and guesses why it is important for that child.
- [3] The children read out their guesses and write down the reasons (in front of the entire class or each group).
- [4] Each child finds out the real owner and pairs up with that child.
- [5] Each pair checks with each other whether the guess or hypothesis was right.
- [6] The children discuss the difficulties in finding the owner as well as issues in guessing (involving the entire class or in each group). They also consider what to be aware of when trying to find the owner based on the item.
- [7] The children make a replica (earthenware, tool, etc.) particular to a certain culture (Jomon Era, etc.) during art class, which are then exhibited.
- [8] Replicas of other cultures (Yoyoi culture, etc.) produced by other children in art classes are buried in the schoolyard (sandbox, etc.), then the first children excavate the buried replicas.
- [9] Children prepare drawings of the relics (replicas) and make hypotheses about the culture based on the excavation results.

The activities in Model 1 make the children realize that the past can be interpreted in various ways. The activities in Model 2, through the archaeology simulation of digging and guessing the owner, develop the children's ability to think scientifically and recreate the past based on physical evidence. However, these activities are not intended to train archaeologists but to develop a scientific way of thinking that reconstructs the activities of previous generations. By working on these activities jointly, the children will make discoveries that cannot be made alone and will deepen their learning.

Thus, it is important to make the children aware that history is the past that is reconstructed by modern people. Involving multiple children (groups and the whole class) who develop their assumptions and hypotheses is the basis of teaching history as a part of social studies for building a democratic society.

4. Democracy as a Key Subject in History Class

People's ability to engage with others is an important social skill. Meanwhile, learning through involvement with one another that teaches children independence carries some risk. For example, the suppression of human rights or resolution of problems by force of arms may be supported via a democratic process. In the 20th century, Hitler's Nazi Germany isolated Jews based on legislative proceedings, and the Japanese government waged a policy of aggression with the approval of the Imperial Diet elected through

universal suffrage. More recently, the United States started the Iraq war with congressional approval. To prevent such risks, social studies teachers must give children sufficient information on case examples of human-rights suppression and tragedies caused by armed force.

In social studies for elementary schools in Japan, the official history curriculum for 6th graders includes historical figures as teaching materials. Therefore, it is important to create teaching materials and learning programs by selecting appropriate historical figures and case examples of past or present human-rights suppression or wars conducted through the democratic process. This is a practical research issue for teaching history in social studies. Children must be repeatedly taught how to make logical judgments without criticizing or glorifying, by simply comparing the past with the present. History education as a part of social studies in elementary school is an important first step⁷.

Notes

- ¹ According to the Immigration Bureau of the Ministry of Justice, there were 2.19 million foreign residents at the end of 2010, accounting for 1.72% of Japan's total population, about 40% of whom are permanent residents (including 0.41 million special permanent residents). In addition, there are about 0.22 million permanent settlers (55% of whom are from South America). Thus, people with various nationalities are living in Japan. Meanwhile, there were about 9.15 million foreign visitors to Japan in 2008, more than double the number in 1998.
- ² The author was involved in showing a school in a remote mountain area to university professors from Indonesia, after visiting a large school in an urban area. After visiting the remote school, the delegation commented, "Japanese schools are democratic because pupils raise their hands to speak their opinions, and the teachers listen carefully and seek opinions from other pupils. There are discussions among pupils, and both the urban school and remote school have the same style." This shows that Japanese schools respect democratic relationships. For details, refer to "Kokuminteki-identity-wo-meguru-ron/so-ten-to-jissen (Points of Argument and Contention on National Identity and Class Building)" written and edited by Tomohito Harada (Meiji-tosho, 2006), and "Gurobaru-kyoiku-no-ron-to-jissen (Theory and Practice of Global Education)", edited by Japan Association of Global Education (Kyouikukaihatu Kenkyuzyo, 2007).
- ³ For basic information on Japan's social studies education, see "Shakaika Kyoikugaku Kenkyu Handbook (Handbook of Research for Social Studies)", (Japanese Educational Research Association for Social Studies, Meiji-tosho, 2001).
- ⁴ Methods such as the child who is holding a baton or ball speaks, or children speak in turn by passing the baton to a nearby friend after speaking.
- ⁵ It is possible to conduct an open-ended discussion that does not draw a single conclusion.
- ⁶ Activities to find materials are also important (including ingenious methods such as asking them to turn over a sheet under which there are instructions to find the next place to go, where they will eventually finally find the materials).
- ⁷ For example, it is important to explain that Christianity was banned during the Edo Period, but it must not discriminate against Christians, and it is also important to explain the Nazi policy against the Jews, but it must never lead to the discrimination against the Jews. Such experiences can be avoided by teaching students about the past and showing them

the importance of improving modern human rights and democracy. This is the social role of history education in social studies for children who will vote in future.