Chapter 6
Having a Zest for Life:
SEL in Japan

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ABSTRACT

This chapter begins with a brief outline of the current Japanese educational system as understood by the author and demonstrates a human need for improved general well-being and inter-personal pedagogy particularly since COVID-19. The term social emotional learning (SEL) was simultaneously introduced in the mid-1990s to the West, while the term having a Zest for Life was promoted in Japan. Policies in Japan have attempted to keep in line with current Western trends in education, yet a gap between policy and practice persists. There are three key areas highlighted—high-stakes testing, enhancing inter-cultural communication, and finding voice—where further implementation of SEL resources and practices could improve outdated approaches and ease social tensions in Japan. This chapter concludes with the hope of inter-connectedness through reading, writing, open resources, and adaptation in classroom practices that would lead to greater understanding of what it means to become a global citizen.

SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN JAPAN

Navigating the complexities of our current world can be challenging. Social-emotional learning (SEL) competencies can help us conciliate the sensitivities within our immediate surroundings. There is a current disconnect between Japan's public face, its policies and ambitions, the actualities within the society, and the lived experiences within many classrooms (Haskins et al., 2006; Wadden & Hale, 2019; Yamagishi, 2011; Yang & Khoo-Lattimore, 2018). This chapter will share three focused examples where SEL could assist Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, and Science (MEXT) in promoting global citizenship. Highlighting the unique approach required to address the needs of students and teachers in Japan, this chapter will emphasize how SEL practices can reduce the tension caused by high stakes testing, enhance intercultural communication, and support students in finding their voice.

The chapter begins with a brief outline of the Japanese education system as it is currently understood. It will discuss what is meant by Japanese education and attempt to analyze aspects of current social structure by considering the recent history of the country. It will talk of the current human need for improved general well-being and a more interpersonal pedagogy. In the following section, the well-known SEL frameworks and their key principles will be reviewed followed by discussion of how MEXT and SEL need to become partners and establish mutually used terms to progress in 21st century living and learning. A reminder to question the ethics behind any educational implementation will close the section, before the three suggested areas for improvement where SEL resources should be swiftly utilized are highlighted. After sections on high stakes testing, intercultural communication and finding voice, the section on implementation concerns will attempt to reconsider ethics, and genuinely question the practicalities and long-term investment required for any reform, particularly in this tumultuous global era. Some of the East meets West complications and misunderstandings could become opportunities for further inquiry where further research and continual respectful learning can take place.

The conclusion attempts to synthesize the Western SEL principles and ideologies with the Japanese Zest for Life. Self-development is a lifestyle choice and one ideally the whole world would venture to undertake. Now is the time for mind, body, and spirit to wholeheartedly collaborate to restore a positive resilience towards a common future.

THE JAPANESE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

In Japan, compulsory education is nine years: six years of primary education, and three years of secondary education. However, as society proclaims senior high school as a necessity, it is often referred to as a 6-3-3 system, including the additional three years of senior high school. The decline in the number of young people, the aging population, the stagnant economy, globalization, artificial intelligence, the economic crisis, and the pandemic, have all contributed to significant stressful changes in Japanese society. Since the turn of the century, with increasing pressure from foreign nations, as a national strategy Japan has promoted educational reform (*MEXT: Reform of Compulsory Education*, n.d.). The pressure to attend high school and university is now at an all-time high as shown by the FY2021 school basic survey conducted yearly by MEXT (NIC, 2022). The 6-3-3-4 system of education, including four years of university study, was established aiming at a principle of equal opportunity in education, and a bachelor's degree is often the minimum requirement on job application forms. Throughout this chapter, unless otherwise specified, the term "schools", will therefore refer to any level of education in the 6-3-3-4 system. See figure 1 for a visual overview of the educational system taken directly from the public website (*MEXT: Reform of Compulsory Education*, n.d.).

The term Japanese education here includes the literature that concerns a wide range of institutions from national, prefectural, private, elite, technical, liberal arts, foreign studies, and women's educational contexts. There are a multitude of establishments and various situations within these boundaries that make it difficult to predict outcomes or reactions to any change and/or initiation of SEL practice (Bain, 1878; Claxton, 2021; Wiliam, 2019). Social behaviors and values are often culturally determined by the type and structure of an institution (Kelly & Adachi, 2019). This makes it difficult to predict how every institution will internalize and implement SEL competencies; there is no one ultimate way and this chapter does not intend to advocate such a theory. Yet there is a gap between the ideological MEXT policies and

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