

FROG BOY AND THE AMERICAN MONKEY: THE BODY IN JAPANESE EARLY SCHOOLING

Below our apartment in Yashiro, Japan, was an exercise area with parallel bars, gymnastic bars, climbing ropes, a balance beam, and so on. Signs about 75 centimeters high explained how to use each one. My daughter, Scooter, a sixth grader, spent much time there climbing and swinging. She used the parallel bars to learn to ride a unicycle. One evening a fourth-grade boy from her school came by with friends. They ignored Scooter, as she did them. He stood in front of one sign, then jumped up and landed on the top of the sign. He hunkered there; buttocks on his heels Asian style, then jumped effortlessly down. He repeated the jump on two other signs before leaving. Awe struck, Scooter asked, "How does he do that? He's like a frog. He's a frog boy."

On the wall of the elementary school gym were mounted horizontal wooden bars used for climbing and exercising. Waiting for PE class to start, Scooter climbed up the bars. Using the bars, ropes pulled over against the wall, and window ledges, she climbed three-quarters of the way to the ceiling. Her teacher, Kikkawa-Sensei, looked up and shook his head. "Our American monkey," he announced, motioning for her to come down for class.

Working within the general framework of cultural psychology (e.g., Bruner, 1996; Cole, 1996; Shweder et al., 1998), I am particularly interested in how the self is differently construed and constructed across cultures (e.g., Kitayama & Markus, 1999, 2000; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Markus, writing in Shweder et al. (1998), described the self as "where the individual, the biological entity, becomes a meaningful entity—a person, a participant in social worlds. Although the experience of self may appear as primarily individual creations, they are in several ways also cultural and historical constructions" (p. 895). This chapter explores the development of a physical self in Japanese early schooling.

I did not come to Japan to study children's physical development or ability. I came to study how cultural beliefs serve as a critical context for children's development (Walsh, 2002a). I soon concluded that cultural beliefs about children's physical capabilities and about the importance of physical development informed this developmental context. In Japanese culture young children are viewed as essentially and importantly physical—their physical development central to early schooling.

Many Japanese early childhood educators believe that intellectual development requires a balanced body and that physical play aligns the body (e.g., Harada, 1997). Harada argues that running games requiring children to change direction, like soccer

and tag, help align the body. He suggests that each preschool day begin with 100 minutes of outdoor physical activity. The preschools (described below) that were my main research sites all began with or had extended outdoor free-play periods.

I look at development of the young Japanese self from two perspectives: (a) my fieldwork, primarily in, but not restricted to, preschools, and (b) through the eyes of my two children, Buck, 5, and Scooter, 12, as they developed selves that became in their eight months in Japanese schools increasingly Japanese.

I had five primary research sites, in or near Yashiro, a town on 22,000 50 minutes northwest of Osaka: three yochien (kindergartens) and two hoikuen (day cares). Kindergartens in Japan are separate from elementary schools and can have three- to five-year-old children. One kindergarten was three to five; one, four and five; and one, fives only. The day cares had toddlers through five-year-olds. The kindergartens were half-day; the day cares, full day. I do not differentiate between the two in this chapter, referring to them generically as *preschools*. I also visited other preschools in Himeji, Osaka, Yao, Nagoya, Gifu, Tokyo, Nishinomiya, and Yokohama as opportunities arose.

I watched children in daily life—on the local playgrounds, in the shopping malls, and on the street. Both my children play ice hockey and joined a team in Kobe. I was able to systematically observe children in an organized sport—practices, games, and tournaments—from August through January.

Some cautions: I strive to remain critical, but I do admire much about Japanese early schooling. We lived in a small town, away from the restrictive pressures of daily life in Tokyo or Osaka. I describe good schools, schools that interested me. All were public preschools, which tend to be truer to Japanese early childhood traditions and less varied than private preschools, which predominate in big cities. My limited observations in urban preschools allowed me to calibrate my sites against urban ones. My descriptions were vetted by Japanese colleagues to ensure that they were identifiably Japanese, that is, within the range of normal practice.

Finally, my wife is Asian. Both children have dark hair and eyes and tan easily. The only *gaijin* (foreigners), Buck in a kindergarten of 180 children, and Scooter in an elementary school of 600, they did not stand out physically, merging relatively easily into their schools. They grew up in a bi-cultural home and had visited family in Thailand many times—both had been to Japan. They had an intuitive sense of Asian culture—they instinctively bowed, could use chopsticks, were familiar with Japanese food, and so on.

Each section of the chapter begins with a vignette then briefly explores one aspect of growing up physical in Japan. I conclude with a discussion of physical development.

GETTING PHYSICAL

I sat on a bench reading near a small playground in married student housing. Buck climbed on the jungle gym. Four mothers stood across the playground talking, occasionally glancing at their toddlers. One toddler climbing on the jungle gym slipped then caught himself, momentarily hanging precariously. His mother turned slightly then returned to her conversation. He repeated the maneuver three times, purposely losing his footing, hanging for a few seconds, and then

regaining it. Each time he laughed elatedly. Later a different toddler, a boy about three, squat, square-headed with a crew cut and a mischievous grin, charged across the playground directly at me. I watched him uneasily—was he going to jump on me! I moved my book down to protect my genitals. At the last second he veered to his right and hopped, froglike, up on the bench next to me. He squatted there for 20 seconds, showing no awareness of me. Then he hopped down and ran back to his friends laughing.

On a beautiful day in May 1998, Buck, and I arrived in Yashiro. My wife and Scooter would come a month later. The rainy season had not yet begun, and the oppressive heat of summer remained a month away.

I was beginning a fellowship at the Center for School Education Research at Hyogo University of Teacher Education. I had been to Yashiro twice and was familiar with the area. I looked forward to eight months of full-time fieldwork. It promised and turned out to be a wonderful year.

The next day we shopped for Buck for kindergarten—the school year in Japan begins in April, breaks for vacation in August, and then resumes in September. We purchased a long list of necessary items—bento box (lunch box), washcloth, school hats, seat cushion, bathing cap, and jacket. He was ready for kindergarten.

I was *very* apprehensive about Buck's going to kindergarten. I had observed in many Japanese preschools. The last time I had been to his kindergarten, I had to protect my backside because some mischievous young boys repeatedly snuck up behind me and "goosed" me vigorously. They thought it great fun and laughed uproariously. I tried my sternest looks, threats, all to no avail. Eventually I kept close to walls. No one seemed to notice—the teachers, the principal who welcomed me, and the professor who brought me. I tried to imagine a Japanese professor visiting a kindergarten back home and no adult noticing kids goosing him. I couldn't. Later my children informed me that Japanese children are fond of goosing. Full disclosure: I was goosed on no other occasion, although, at one preschool, I was kicked in the genitals, and at another a sweetly smiling girl gouged a fingernail-full of flesh from the side of my nose.

Japanese preschools are, compared to contemporary American preschools, raucous places, filled with loud rambunctious kids who run, wrestle, hit, roughhouse, and climb on and over everything. Buck was a gentle soul. At his university preschool in Illinois children were encouraged to "use their words," as in "I don't like it when you hit me," fighting and hitting were forbidden, and rambunctiousness was constrained. Japanese children do use their words, but words of their *own* choosing—two of the first words that Buck learned were *baka*, fool, and *ochidi*, buttocks. But they are more likely to use their bodies. Would Buck be tough enough? Colleagues on sabbatical had packed up their families to the other side of the world, only to have the experience spoiled by one unhappy family member.

Would Buck, having been pushed around enough, refuse to go to kindergarten? Would I be doing fieldwork with an unhappy five-year-old in tow? American friends whose kids had been in Japanese preschool had described their kids being harassed and teased mercilessly. One told of his son taking a peanut butter sandwich from his Power Rangers lunch box to hear all the kids yell derisively, "Shit sandwich!"

I had told Buck what to expect, explaining that even if he spoke Japanese, "using his words" might not help. Scooter, as physical as her brother is cerebral, and about

whose adjustment I had few worries, worked to "toughen and roughen" him up. She teased and pushed him around, urging him to fight back.

Each day I waited up for tears and tales, and none came. Each day he emerged happy and excited, eager to tell me about his day. After a week I asked if kids hit him or pushed him around. He shook his head emphatically, "A lot!" He continued admiringly, "The kids like to hit and fight, and the teachers don't make us stop." What did he do when the kids hit him? "I do this!" He crouched, feet wide apart, fists up like a boxer, growling and shaking his body—transformed. I was stunned. "What do the kids do when you do that?" I asked. "They run away, and then I chase them." Weeks later, teachers asked me to talk to Buck. They feared that he was being too aggressive and might hurt someone. Brave new world!

Buck did face subtle frustrations. His friends could climb the six-meter metal poles on the playground, and he could not. We returned to the empty playground in the evening for pole-climbing practice. First a half meter up the pole, then two. One evening he climbed to the top. The secret, he told me, was "sweaty sticky feet." His friends were still more agile and more confident about their physical abilities. Over the next eight months, however, with occasional tutoring and prodding, Buck became more confident physically. He ran, jumped, climbed, wrestled, and roughhoused with a new-found exuberance, reveling in his physical presence and developing abilities. Young children's friendships are profoundly physical. They develop their sense of a physical self in physical contact with others.

Then one day in early Fall, visibly upset, he stalked into my office. I waited for the worst. He stood shaking his head and staring at the floor. What was wrong? "It's just like CDL [his preschool back in Illinois]," he grumbled. I was puzzled. "The teachers said no more hitting and fighting. Just like CDL," shaking his head in disgust. I murmured sympathetically. "But we're going to keep on doing it," he said firmly. "We're not going to let it be like CDL!"

CONSTRAINING DEVELOPMENT

He was Japanese-American and had been working at an international company in Kobe for three years. She was Japanese and worked at the same company. They were engaged and visibly in love, sitting close on a warm day. They politely asked me about my research, and I described the physical precocity of young Japanese children. He was skeptical, sure that American children were more physically and athletically advanced than Japanese children. I explained how common unicycles were in preschools—that week some five-year-old girls had ridden unicycles across the playground swinging "hula hoops" over their heads then riding through them. He remained skeptical. Surely I was describing a rare event. He turned to his fiancée and asked confidently if she could ride a unicycle. She looked at him as though he were daft, "Of course, I can ride a unicycle! [Am I uncoordinated?]" He jerked back involuntarily; mouth and eyes opened wide, "You can ride a unicycle?" She looked at us, rolling her eyes. Just when you think you know everything about your lover.

Central to the idea of cultural contexts for development is the notion of *cultural constraints*. *Cultural constraints* support some kinds of learning, making them easier, but at the same time make other learning difficult, even impossible. Hatano and Miyake (1991) pointed out that "cultural effects on learning are both enhancing and restricting. It is an important task for researchers in this area to specify how cultural

constraints produce this double-sided effect" (p. 279). Constraints refer to how a culture enhances and restricts (a) what is possible and probable, (b) what is accessible, (c) what is valued, and (d) what is supported.

How, then, do preschools constrain Japanese children's physical development? What is seen as possible, and impossible, accessible and inaccessible, and so on? The constraints operating in preschool enhance children's physical development. Returning to the unicycle example: Unicycles are common in Japanese preschools—riding a unicycle is seen as possible. Children have access to them at school. Unicycles are readily available and relatively inexpensive in department stores, and children rode them in our campus neighborhood. School playgrounds often have long low bars that children can hold as they learn to ride. Being able to ride a unicycle is valued, by both children and adults. Being able to ride a unicycle in the U.S. is not seen as a possibility for young children; unicycles are not readily available and so on.

The culture values physical activity. The major fall event in schools is the Sports Festival, a daylong athletic competition of group rather than individual events. Families begin to arrive shortly after 8:00 a.m. and set up their tables, mats, and coolers. The competitions begin at 9 and continue until 3. All the children in the school are involved, including those with special needs. A most memorable experience was attending a sports festival at a school for children with mental and physical handicaps. The memory of children on walkers running short races and the cheers as the last ones crossed the line remains vivid.

In the Yashiro area, each town had a sports festival, with neighborhood teams. One event was a long relay race. Young children ran the first lap; the next by slightly older children, up through adulthood to seniors and back down again to a final lap run by young children. No runner dropped a baton during the entire race. I was astonished, then remembered the children in the preschools practice running relays. The runners had been running relays all their lives. Demure housewives sprinted around the track like experienced track and field athletes, which, in fact, they were.

The athletic activities in preschools reflect larger cultural constraints. At one preschool the children moved from 100 minutes of outside play to inside activities by slowly massaging each muscle group with towels, chanting, "Ichi, ni, san...(1, 2, 3,...)." A colleague explained that they were massaging each muscle group—the counting ensured that they massaged each one long enough. A few weeks later on a Tokyo subway, a business man in a well-cut suit was vigorously slapping his leg. No one appeared to notice. Done with one leg, he switched to other. Remembering the preschool kids, I realized he was massaging his muscle groups. After that I noticed this phenomenon often.

As a Japanese scholar friend explained to me, the body is central to the Japanese cultural narrative. The Western mind-body distinction was never part of the cultural view of self. As he put it, "We never accepted Christianity or Freud."

GROWING UP GENKI

One evening, when I returned home with a colleague, Scooter was practicing on the high bar. Envious of her classmates' proficiency on the school playground bars, she struggled to catch up with them. We watched and encouraged her. She grew increasingly frustrated. My colleague, in his early 30's, took off his sports coat and tie and joined her. He pulled himself up on the bar and performed series of flips. He showed her what to do at each point in each move. I was astounded. I thought of him as a "techy," graceful, but not athletic. Maybe I saw all Japanese academics as pleasant bookish types, but not athletic. I should have realized that the little frog boys eventually grew up and some became academics. A few days later a friend complained to my wife and me about the scarcity of available and interesting unmarried men in the area—some topics cross cultures. We mentioned my colleague. She dismissed him—too bookish, not athletic enough, boring. Excitedly I described how he had transformed himself into a gymnast. She looked at me and my wife with the same look the young Japanese woman had given her intended, "All Japanese can do that." We had forgotten.

To be *genki*—an exuberant word meaning fit, strong, healthy, and physical—is highly valued. Kids respond to roll by jumping up and loudly announcing their presence, perhaps referring to a favorite cartoon character, "Doraemon!!" The teacher nods approvingly, "Genki!" Kids are expected to be tough and strong. Yashiro was unbearably humidly hot in the summer and bone-chillingly cold in the winter. On the coldest days, when I was shivering in coat and hat and unable to hold my video camera, kids ran around the playground in shorts, t-shirts, and unlined cloth jackets. Back in the classroom, heated by a portable kerosene heater in the middle of the room, I attempted to thaw my frozen fingers. The kids opened windows and asked the teachers to turn to heater off, "Too hot!" All part of being a Japanese self, kid-style.

The children's daring fascinated me. They appeared ready to climb to the top of anything. In time I understood that children appeared daring because the daring moment masked the gradual process of becoming daring. The daring of five-year-olds had begun when they were toddlers and had been developed slowly and with much practice. Price (1982) emphasized the importance for children's learning and development of "experiencing a prolonged, pressure-free period of familiarization" (p. 282). Extended periods of free play outside on playgrounds with challenging equipment and a sense of unrestricted space allowed children to push the limits of this equipment and of themselves. For example, they not only climbed the poles, at the top they climbed out on the bar connecting the poles and sat there.

Daring is defined by one's sense of danger, and *danger* is to some important extent constructed by expectations. The kids did not consider their actions dangerous, nor did the teachers, because the kids had been performing them in some form since they were toddlers. Developing a sense of daring is process of continual small steps over a long period of time. The young Japanese self is seen as, and accepted as, a physical self, developed on the playgrounds and in rambunctious interaction with others from an early age. Kids are encouraged to run, to climb, to fall, and to roughhouse. They are given the time and space to persist and practice.

Over the years I have watched too many ice hockey practices. Scooter has played for 10 years, Buck for five. American practices are rapid-fire affairs, with drills lasting a few minutes at time, driven, apparently, by a cultural belief in children's short attention spans. Move on to a new drill before kids get bored. As a result American kids' basic skills are often weak. One cannot develop good skills practicing them a few minutes a couple times a week. Their Japanese team's

practices were more patiently paced. The same drill often continued 15 minutes or more, for example, kids in pairs passing to each other, back and forth, back and forth. The coaches accompanied the drills with explicit detailed instruction, squatting down, often kneeling on the ice, making small adjustments in the angle of a skate or stick blade, adjusting arm position, extending the follow through. Gaining mastery takes a long time and much practice.

Bordering the sidewalk up the hill to Buck's kindergarten stood a slightly sloped concrete wall that was about 4 meters high at the bottom of the hill, slowly diminishing in height as one climbed the hill. The wall was made of square pieces of formed concrete that allowed for toe and finger holds. For the kids on the way to school it became a climbing wall. The older more experienced kids climbed at the bottom where the wall was the highest and then walked along the top. The younger kids climbed closer to the top where the wall was not as high, slowly moving down the hill as they got more proficient. All jumped off at some point. I often saw kids jumping from heights of two meters, occasionally jumping over their mothers.

Both Scooter and Buck became more physical in their time in Japan. They became stronger—they had more hours of physical education than they had at home. They had more opportunities—all Japanese schools have swimming pools, and children swim every day in June and July. They sat still less and exercised more. They also learned the importance of being *genki*—aware of and confident in their physical capabilities.

A common culminating activity to elementary school is for the sixth grade to go to the sea and swim a kilometer or more. They swim as a group, with the fast swimmers in the back and the slow ones up front, teachers along the way urging them on and leading them in chants. Scooter arrived in Yashiro late June, less than a month from the planned trip to the Sea of Japan. She was not a strong swimmer, which her teacher diagnosed the first day. I anticipated that he would apologize profusely and tell me that given the late date, Scooter would have to make the trip as an observer. I was completely wrong. He asked me for permission to keep her after school for additional swimming lessons and instructed me to take her to the university pool on weekends.

Scooter left for the sea apprehensive and nervous. She returned three days later changed. As she got off the bus, her smile transfigured her, and her feet seemed not to touch the ground. She had completed the 2-kilometer swim, and she came back more confident than I had ever seen her, not only in her physical abilities, but also in her abilities in general. She was *genki*.

NATURALLY SENSIBLE

Scooter rushed into my office. "You won't believe what happened," she shouted. "You know how I've been practicing walking across the swinging structure?" It was a 20-meter-long narrow metal structure, ubiquitous on preschool and elementary school playgrounds—two parallel elongated inverted-u-shaped bars connected across the top by parallel metal bars at short intervals. Kids swing from one bar to the next from one end to the other. They soon master swinging and begin experimenting. "I finally got so that I could walk across the top without hesitating. I was so excited so I called Kikkawa-Sensei over and showed him. I thought he would congratulate me.

He just watched and asked, 'Can you run across it?'" She shook her head in total disbelief. "Can you believe that a teacher would encourage me to do something like that? Something dangerous? That would never happen in America." She was never able to run across the top; by the time she left she could move across it rapidly. She was, after all, only an *American* monkey.

In an earlier report of this research (Walsh, 2002a), I identified common Japanese cultural beliefs about children. Three are relevant to this discussion.

1. Children are naturally good and naturally sensible (e.g., Fujinaga, 1967). They can be trusted to make sensible decisions.
2. The "spirit" formed by early experience provide the basis for later life. A proverb states, "The spirit of a three-year-old [by Western counting, two-year-old] will last until 100."
3. Children are physical beings, and their physical development and expression critical to their well being.

I focus on the first two and how they inform the third. The belief that children are naturally sensible and can be trusted to make sensible decisions explains why children are given so much space, literally and figuratively, on the playgrounds for athletic and other activities. Teachers trust that children will not endanger themselves. Japanese parents and teachers are surely concerned about their children, but the concern starts from a trust in their ability to take care of themselves. People told me often that children were smart enough not to do things they weren't capable of. The most difficult adjustment we had to make as parents was giving Scooter and Buck more space than we did back home in Illinois.

Tobin (2003) wrote that

The concluding argument of *Preschools in Three Cultures* [Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989] is that the great strength of Japanese preschools is that they provide young children with the kind of social complexity otherwise lacking in these children's overly sheltered, narrow lives. This social complexity, in turn promotes *chiteki hattatsu* [difficult to translate—something like "intellectual development"] that occurs not so much because of how teachers interact with individual children as because of how they restrain themselves from interacting, by giving children space and time to interact with each other and with their environment. (p. 8)

Tobin is certainly correct that preschools provide a needed alternative to the home. But he does not argue that preschool completely breaks from the home. The constraints change, but the larger constraints of Japanese culture pervade both school and home. Even protected Japanese toddlers experience a physical freedom that, when seen on video, makes Americans uncomfortable (Walsh, 2001). The key is the space provided by teachers and parents who maintain a distance, again both figuratively and literally, from children. Children's interactions with each other are seldom directly mediated by teachers.

Preschools playgrounds are, by American standards, unsupervised. Teachers come and go, at times playing with children, but they do not "supervise," keeping the children and the playground under surveillance. A Japanese kindergarten teacher who had visited U.S. preschools asked me, "When American teachers are standing against the fence watching the playground," she leaned against the wall, arms folded across her chest slowly rotating her head from side to side, "what are they *doing*?"

What had I been doing all the times I had spent supervising playgrounds as a teacher? I replied that they were making sure that kids followed playground rules

and didn't get hurt. "But can't the children do that themselves?" she asked. Good question.

In one kindergarten the kids liked to climb a tall tree behind one of the buildings. The tree was made for climbing with large evenly spaced branches. The older kids sometimes climbed quite high, at times making me nervous. The teachers paid little attention and seldom came into this area. I asked the teachers about the tree and how high the kids were climbing. By this time I knew that teachers cultivated an apparent inattention while almost clairvoyantly aware of every little thing happening on the playground and off. They had talked about the tree climbing at length in their daily meetings. They decided to ignore it because they didn't want to inhibit the children's explorations and because they were concerned that if they supervised the climbing in any way, the kids would become dependent on them and would, in this dependence become less careful. Further, they wanted the older kids to be responsible for the younger ones. Later, I saw older children helping younger ones climb and keeping them from climbing too high.

The first time I visited Japan, in the late 80's, our hosts took my wife, Scooter, then a toddler, and me to a zoo in Tokyo. As we got off the train, a class of third graders emptied out of the next car. The teacher, a young man, alone with his class, went to the front of the children, who more or less lined up three and four across behind him, and led them across the street to the zoo. I counted 30-some children. I asked my hosts if we could follow them for a while. The children were loud and spirited, and occasionally one or two would wander from the group. Each time they did, other kids ran out and pulled them back into line. The teacher *never* looked back. He continued straight ahead. I realized then, although I certainly did not understand how, that teaching in this culture was deeply differently defined from teaching, as I knew it. Children were to be trusted to make sensible decisions and to take care of themselves, not only individually but also as a group.

Japanese kids eventually develop into the polite quiet adults of the stereotype, which, in fact, they are when the context calls for quiet and politeness. But children are expected to be loud and wild—their spirit is not be quashed. Middle school and high school will do that, but by then the spirit will be fully formed. Exuberance in word and deed is valued. Children are seldom corrected. The typical strategy for dealing with behavior too troublesome to be ignored (ignoring is the rule) is distracting kids—something Japanese adults do well. My head often rang from the noise in the large playrooms on rainy days; more than once I got hit by objects being flung across the room. But, "They're kids, aren't they," teachers explained. Their words were more than explanation, they were encouragement. Spirited behavior is not an unfortunate fact of life, the noise and the chaos and the rambunctiousness are markers of the spirit needed to become the polite mature adult valued by the culture. A mature polite adult not informed by this spirit is an empty shell.

TRANSFORMING FROEBEL

We walked through a large park in Osaka with friends and their toddler. A large fiberglass dragon curled around part of the playground. From it protruded climbing and swinging

apparatuses. The dragon was about 30 meters long, and the head; the mouth opened wide, rose about 7 meters in the air at its top. Many kids were playing on the dragon; most on the tail section, clambering over the triangular ridges that spanned the dragons back from head to tail. A boy, about 11, moved along the top of the dragon, stepping from the top of each triangular ridge to the next, balancing effortlessly until he came to the highest point on the head. Scooter and I were transfixed—the others had gone on down the hill. He stood balancing on the tip of the triangle—at this point about a quarter meter high with a rounded (I checked later), not flat, top. He stared off across the Osaka skyline for about 5 minutes then slowly turned and walked back the same way. In total envy Scooter rued, "I wish I could do that. I wish I could do that."

In 1837 Friedrich Froebel founded the institution that three years later he would name the *kindergarten*. The German word *kindergarten* can be translated in two ways, a *children's garden*, that is, a garden belonging to or for children, and a *garden of children*, that is, a garden where children grow like plants, and where, like plants, they are to be tended and nurtured. Both meanings can be found in Froebel. In fact, Froebel wanted each child to have an individual garden as well a larger garden tended by the class. In the history of American kindergarten the latter meaning eventually became dominant (Chung & Walsh, 2000). The Japanese prefer the former. Plants, after all, do not move. They cannot run and jump and climb.

As have many ideas imported from abroad, Froebel's ideas were made Japanese as they were interpreted through the lens of Japanese cultural beliefs. Japanese early educators take the idea of a garden for children literally. Plants proliferate. One sees the principal out weeding the flowers and the plants. Animals—rabbits, ducks, and chickens—are common, and the children's feeding the animals is an important activity.

The second way that the preschools are like gardens is that preschool is seen as an outside activity. A most visible difference between American and Japanese preschools is size of the playgrounds—Japanese playgrounds are generally large, even in the large cities. A second difference is materials. Classrooms have comparatively few puzzles, books, toys and so on. Playgrounds are elaborately equipped, not only with climbing structures and slides and so on, but also with unicycles, bicycles, tricycles, shovels, stilts, gymnastic equipment, hoses, troughs for diverting water, buckets, tools, and so on. Children do spend time inside, and in the large private urban kindergartens—I observed one with more than 700 children—organizational constraints keep kids inside more than in my five primary sites. But even there, the kids were outside many more than American preschool children. In my primary sites, children spent at least as much, and often more, time outside than inside, and until organized inside activity, usually late in the day, they moved freely from inside to out and back.

A preschool focused on outside activities will be more focused on the physical than one that emphasizes inside activities. Ironically, Froebel's *gifts*, which have generally disappeared from preschool education, emphasized the use of small muscles, as early critics of Froebel pointed out. These critics missed the importance that Froebel placed on nature walks, which he picked up from Pestalozzi, and other outdoor activities. In any case, American critics of Froebel replaced the small muscle activities of the gifts with limited large motor activities, for example, the circle games popular in early schooling.

The Japanese went from the gifts to unrestricted outdoor physical play. The emphasis on large muscle development was never limited to a circle games. Playgrounds encourage children to push themselves. Ayers (1993) argued that classrooms should be "laboratories for discovery and surprise, spaces where children can be active and experimental in following their own compelling goals, places where knowledge opens to future knowledge" (p. 58). Japanese preschool playgrounds are laboratories for physical discovery and surprise.

CONCLUSION

Japan is in transition—the long stagnant economy, the declining birth and marriage rates, changes in social structure have all had a serious and deleterious impact on early schooling. Enrollments in preschools have declined precipitously. Three of my primary sites had empty classrooms, and the birth rate has declined more slowly in small towns and rural areas than in large cities. Private preschools in big cities compete intensely for children. They must to survive. Japanese early childhood educators worry that traditional preschool values and practices are being lost in this competition. They worry about the appearance of societal problems they have never faced before.

I do not intend to romanticize Japanese early schooling. I note in passing Holloway (2000), who presents a bleak picture of Japanese early schooling. Her research is, at best, problematic (see Walsh, in press). Certainly one can find poorly run preschools and bad teachers in Japan. But they are not the norm.

Comparisons across cultures are tricky. The temptation to ignore the complexities and contradictions within in order to facilitate comparisons across cultures always beckons. I struggle with the temptation. I admire much about Japanese early schooling. A prominent Japanese professor told me that kindergarten is the high point of Japanese education. I certainly agree. I also believe that Japanese preschool is "a last best place" (Walsh, 2002b) in early schooling across the world. Early schooling in the U.S. has become increasingly restrictive, with children given little of the space and time needed for development. The dominant discourse of "developmentally appropriate practice" has contributed to the increasing restrictiveness (see, e.g., Lee, J-H, 2003; Walsh, 1991).

Focusing on the physical in early schooling, encouraging, supporting, valuing physical activities and development benefits children in profound ways. Whether physical and social development serve as the foundation of intellectual (and emotional) development, and I believe they do, young children can reach levels of physical and social expertise much more readily than they can equivalent levels of intellectual expertise. Intellectual development is a long slow process, constrained (hindered) by complex symbol systems and by well developed bodies of knowledge that take years, even decades, to master or to begin to.

Early on children can master climbing poles, riding unicycles, running fast, tumbling, walking on stilts, kicking soccer balls, and so on—if they have adequate space, time, support, and so on. American educators emphasize "self-esteem." Bruner argues (1996), however, that self-esteem is meaningful only within the context of agency and the ability to evaluate that agency.

A transformation occurs when young children begin to master a physical skill. Take, for example, ice skating. When kids can jump out on the ice without first steadying themselves on the rink door. Kids who are ordinary or even klutzy on dry land become graceful and in control on the ice, aware of their agency. Scooter, struggling with early adolescence, confided to me that no matter how bad her life was off the ice, how out of control and frightening, as soon as she stepped on the ice, she entered a world where she was in control, where she didn't worry about being awkward or accepted.

Children need rich opportunities to develop physically that give them many ways to excel. A dirty little secret about schooling is that one has to be good at only a few things to be wildly successful, and, one has to be bad at an only a few things to be wretchedly unsuccessful.

Not every child can be a dominant athlete, but every child can have an athletic self. Every child can be supported in this quest. I saw hundreds of preschoolers in Japan swinging themselves up and over bars. I also saw on playgrounds "scaffolds," not in the figurative Brunerian sense, but actual wooden devices that helped children get their legs up and over the bars. They walked up the scaffold and then easily swung over the bar. Again, what is possible, accessible, supported, and valued?

The developmental psychology encountered in the latest *Handbook of Child Psychology* (1998) is complex and systems-oriented. The developmental psychology encountered in everyday discussions within education, the folk psychology, is Piagetian stage-theory with maturationist underpinnings and that underestimates children's physical, social, intellectual, and other abilities. Development is viewed as *natural* and distinct from *learning*. Within developmental psychology, the longstanding distinction between development and learning was blurred years ago. Within American folk psychology, the distinction remains strong. If development is *natural* and *distinct from learning*, then norms for development can be determined by carefully observing children and establishing what children can do at a specific age. The *normality* of the individual child can then be measured by comparing the child to these norms. This approach, traceable back to G. Stanley Hall and his Child Study Movement and to Arnold Gesell, underlies the idea of *mental age* and IQ.

This limited discourse on development ignores the reality that what children can do at any given historical and cultural moment depends a great deal on cultural constraints—what is accessible and not accessible, valued and not valued, and so on. The norms themselves become constraints that both enhance and restrict as society sets strong expectations about what children can and cannot, and should and should not do.

Missing is the sense of the possible. Today's female athletes differ markedly from their often ground-breaking predecessors. They run faster, jump higher, skate faster, and so on. The advances have not been the incremental ones that mark men's athletics over recent decades. Women's basketball or ice hockey or soccer is different sports from 20 years ago. Why? The cultural constraints have changed. Women's athletic development, once restricted, has been enhanced. Women have been able to begin to explore the bodily possible.

Enough said.

REFERENCES

- Ayers, W. (1993). *To teach: The journey of a teacher*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Bruner, J. (1996). *The culture of education*. Cambridge: Harvard.
- Chung, S., & Walsh, D. J. (2000). Unpacking "child-centeredness": A history of meanings. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 32, 215-234.
- Cole, M. (1996). *Cultural psychology: A once and future discipline*. Cambridge: Harvard.
- Fujinaga, H. (1967). *Early childhood education in Japan* (in Japanese). Tokyo: Kodansha.
- Harada, S., & Saito, T. (1997). *Ashi karano kenkou zukuri: Okaasan to kodomo no tameno kenkou zukuri*. Tokyo: Chuou Houki. (in Japanese)
- Hatano, G., & Miyake, N. (1991). What does a cultural approach offer to research on learning? *Learning and Instruction*, 1, 273-281.
- Holloway, S. (2000). *Contested Childhood: Diversity and Change in Japanese Preschools*. New York: Routledge.
- Kitayama, S., & Markus, H. R. (1999). Yin and yang of the Japanese self: The cultural psychology of personality coherence. In D. Cervone & Y. Shoda (Eds.), *The coherence of personality: Social-cognitive bases of consistency, variability, and organization*. New York: Guilford.
- Kitayama, S., & Markus, H. R. (2000). The pursuit of happiness and the realization of sympathy: Cultural patterns of self, social relations, and well-being. In E. Diener & E. M. Suh (Eds.), *Culture and subjective well-being* (pp. 113-161). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Lee, J-H. (2003). *The quest for quality: Evaluation and early childhood programs*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.
- Markus, H. R., & Kitayama, S. (1991). Culture and self: Implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation. *Psychological Review*, 98, 224-253.
- Price, G. G. (1982). Cognitive learning in early childhood education: Mathematics, science, and social studies. In B. Spodek (Ed.), *Handbook of research in early childhood education* (pp. 264-294). New York: Free Press.
- Shweder, R. A., Goodnow, J., Hatano, G., LeVine, R., Markus, H., & Miller, P. (1999). The cultural psychology of development: One mind, many mentalities. In W. Damon (Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology, volume 1, theoretical models of human development* (pp. 865-937). New York: John Wiley.
- Tobin, J. (2003, April). *Some thoughts on the "intellectual development" of young children in Japan and the United States*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago.
- Tobin, J., Wu, D., & Davidson, D. (1989). *Preschool in three cultures: Japan, China, and the United States*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Walsh, D. J. (1991). Reconstructing the discourse on developmental appropriateness: A developmental perspective. *Early Education and Development*, 2, 109-119.
- Walsh, D. J. (2001, April). *The cringe factor: Cultural differences in beliefs about young children*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Seattle, Washington.
- Walsh, D. J. (2002a). The development of self in Japanese preschools. In L. Bresler & A. Ardichvili (Eds.), *Multiple paradigms for international research in education: Experience, theory, & practice*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Walsh, D. J. (2002b, April). *A last best place: The strengths of Japanese preschools*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans.
- Walsh, D. J. (in press). Dimensions of Japanese early schooling [Review of the book *Contested childhood: Diversity and change in Japanese preschools*]. *Contemporary Psychology*.

