

Chapter 1

EXPLANATIONS AND AN INTRODUCTION

In 1872 the Fundamental Code of Education resoundingly proclaimed, "There shall, in the future, be no community with an illiterate family, nor a family with an illiterate person." Today this utopian goal is within sight, not in the United States of course, but in the nation which stated it, our competitor, Japan (Anderson 1975, 21).

American education has similar aims, but with one in five of our adults functionally illiterate, our ideals and our reality are separated by a gaping chasm. Although many who cannot read and write are able to perform marvelous feats, including putting on convincing acts of reading their children's report cards or their supervisor's notes, their failings exact enormous personal and societal tolls (St. John and Harman 1979).

Front page headlines are hard to ignore; "U.S. Pupils Lag from Grade 1, Study Finds" trumpeted the June 17, 1984, *New York Times*. We are told that Japanese children turn in superior test performances, especially in all-important science and math, and we put two and two together. Many educational reformers say our schools should be more like theirs. Their longer school day and year, the compulsory, standardized curriculum, the constant testing, the rigid codes of behavior—all claim their advocates. Now some of our public school students are wearing Japanese-style school uniforms.

Meanwhile, our model of educational efficiency worries and yearns

for reform. Some Japanese are looking for guidance from what many Americans may think an improbable source, from American alternative, open education. Schools where children "learn without compulsion" (the phrase is Japanese) are, for some, a desired utopia. They call them "free" schools, these learning environments which are continually re-created in flexible response to the ever-changing needs of children.

We Americans have a history of tolerating and occasionally encouraging visionaries who strive to create schools where children ask new questions instead of memorizing answers to the old. The teachers in these schools insist that knowledge and experience are interconnected and that learning is both continuous and social. In these schools children learn to live together and to assume responsibility for themselves and their society. From 1896 to 1903 the Chairman of the University of Chicago's Department of Philosophy, Psychology, and Pedagogy, John Dewey, and his wife directed a laboratory school where Dewey's progressive beliefs were put into practice. Influenced by Dewey, in 1914 Caroline Pratt opened a school with a goal of fostering, not dulling, children's natural desire to learn; in 1989 Miss Pratt's City and Country School celebrated its 75th birthday. Since 1925 the parent cooperative Peninsula School in Menlo Park, California, in accordance with Dewey's philosophy, has been working at matching its educational experiences with the needs of children.

Another educational experiment, Mrs. Marrietta Johnson's Organic School in Fairhope, Alabama, has followed the tenets of Jean Jacques Rousseau for more than eighty years. Rousseau insisted that education must be based on the needs and innate capacities of children, not the demands and accomplishments of adults (Dewey and Dewey 1915).

The upheavals in American society from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s, through the heated times of the Vietnam war and the Civil Rights Movement, stirred antagonism towards authority and stimulated the growth of non-traditional schools. At first small private schools sprang up, nurtured by social unrest and distrust of existing institutions. During the 1970s, public school systems got on the alternative bandwagon and developed different styles of schools. In some school districts parents and students were able to select their educational experiences from menus of alternatives. (The notion of allowing students and parents to select a school instead of being assigned by the system is attracting many adherents in 1990; advocates feel that choice and a sense of belonging will strengthen "good" schools and drive out the "bad." Opponents fear that the most needy children would be hurt by being left behind.) Among

other alternatives, there were the Freedom Schools which grew out of the Civil Rights Movement and the free schools which advocated A. S. Neill-style anti-authoritarian freedom. Open classrooms practiced the methods of British informal education. The philosophical sources of these alternative schools have venerable histories influenced by Pestalozzi, Rousseau, Froebel, Tolstoi, Montessori, Dewey, Neill, and others.

In 1919, John Dewey accepted an invitation to lecture at Tokyo University—although he refused the Emperor's offer of The Order of the Rising Sun. By all outward appearances Dewey's words and actions have been long forgotten in Japan, but the record breaking sale of more than six million copies of a small book written by a television personality, Tetsuko Kuroyanagi, suggests the longing for progressive, humane education still survives. When Kuroyanagi was only six years old, she, Tottochan, was expelled from public school, a victim of her curiosity and non-conforming behavior. In *Totto-Chan: the Little Girl at the Window* she wrote that her failure had taken her to a remarkable "free" school which somehow managed to survive in the heart of Tokyo through the authoritarian and repressive days of World War II. At Tomoe School she and her classmates were given reassurance and responsibility instead of tests; they followed their own interests and learned from experience instead of omnipotent textbooks and teachers. Our bombers destroyed the school, but its influence lives on (Kuroyanagi 1981).

Alternative American Schools: Ideals in Action was written originally for the Japanese parents and educators who are worried about the monolithic authoritarianism of their nation's educational system. A Japanese language version, titled *Furee Sukuru: Sono-Genjtan-to-Yume (Free Schools: Reality and Dream)*, was published in Tokyo in 1984.

Many teachers complain that American parents have abdicated responsibility for schooling in general and homework in particular. Most Japanese parents, on the other hand, are caught up in education mania. The "education mama" throws herself headlong into every level of her children's schooling, especially that of her sons. Her task is formidable. To score well on high school and college entrance exams, all students must master a detailed curriculum mandated by the nation's central Ministry of Education. These competitive examinations alone determine a student's lifelong options. The few students who get into Tokyo University are guaranteed success; in 1975 a third of the presidents of the top Japanese companies and sixteen of the eighteen top bureaucrats in the Ministry of Education were Tokyo graduates (Rohlen 1983). Those who fail to get into a "good" college must assume lower stations in life.

The lower the test score, the lower the status. These tests take precedence over everything. Few children help with household chores; they study. Boys do not hold part time jobs or deliver newspapers; they study.

Japanese children are promoted automatically no matter how well or poorly they master their annual piece of the uniform curriculum; exclusion from the group would be shameful. Missed material simply is not repeated. Japanese journalists call this system 7-5-3 education; only 70 percent of primary school children, 50 percent of junior high students, and 30 percent of high school students are able to keep up with the frantic rate of instruction with the remainder being the "left-behinds" (Hori 1982).

It is not surprising, therefore, that educational cramming has become a multi-billion dollar Japanese industry (Lohr 1984). One out of four elementary school students and one out of two junior high students go to cram schools after their long school day (Hechinger 1986). To gain the ultimate competitive edge some parents pay up to \$1,000 a week for prekindergarten summer schools in which their three- and four-year-olds are drilled up to eight hours a day, six days a week (Traeger 1984).

Recently our Educational Testing Service acknowledged that training can improve our students' college entrance S.A.T. (Scholastic Aptitude Test) scores. Our three- and four-year-olds soon may be required to go to public schools. What do we have to learn from our Japanese economic competitors?

The litany of documentable concerns about Japanese education includes adolescent suicide, school phobia, the violence and delinquency particularly prevalent in the pressure cooker junior high schools, weak backs, inability to play, everything, in fact, except achievement test scores.

Many Japanese fear their superior test scores are bought at the expense of intellectual creativity. They worry that the United States, with only twice as many people, has won thirty times more Nobel prizes in the sciences (Lohr 1984). Some maverick business enterprises are turning to their societal failures for creativity. The video game manufacturer, Namco, hires reformed juvenile delinquents and C students, one of whom, Toru Iwatani, created Pac Man (Lohr 1983).

Risk taking is dangerous in a society in which the motto, "If the nail sticks up, pound it in," is practiced in businesses and schools. It is stunning that eight Japanese children set off for Leiston, England, in 1983 to attend Summerhill, the radical free school founded by A.S. Neill. In the United States Neill's concept of educational freedom stirs little enthusiasm, but in educationally totalitarian Japan fifteen of Neill's books are in

print and the Neill Society holds regular meetings (Hori 1982).

Their attraction to "free" schools was further fueled by a journalist from the *Hokkaido Shimbun Press*. On assignment in the United States in 1981, Yasushi Ohnuma sent his newspaper reports about John Holt's home schooling movement, the Parkway Program, Clonlara School, and other educational exotica. A book of his collected articles, recently in third printing, focused the public's attention on a range of possibilities of education "without compulsion." On a 1982 lecture tour Clonlara's director, Pat Montgomery, stirred her Japanese listeners with passionate accounts of her educational experiences; her lectures in turn became another book assembled by Mr. Ohnuma, and the movement began to pick up speed.

In April, 1983, a mother and her twelve-year-old son left their home and family in Nara City, Japan, to move to Ann Arbor, Michigan. Their sole reason was to allow the boy to attend Clonlara, a small, private free school based on Neill's philosophy, a school possibly more familiar to Japanese parents than Ann Arborites. In 1988 the boy graduated from Ann Arbor's public alternative Community High School.

Under present conditions these traveling young people are unable to return to Japanese mainstream education. Even the thousands of children attending traditional schools abroad find reassimilation extremely difficult. The lure of "free," open education must be extremely powerful to entice families to sever ties with all that's familiar.

My fascination with the rich possibilities of alternative, open education grew slowly. Realizations accumulated over the ten years I worked with a group of psychologists in private practice and tried to help children in emotional pain. While other psychologists consulted with the parents, with the child's and parents' permission I routinely made contact with the child's teachers and school. One revelation was that changing the school environment could help a child faster and more effectively than traditional psychotherapeutic intervention alone.

During the process of earning a Ph.D. in Counseling and Guidance from Stanford University's School of Education to add to my M.A. in Child Clinical Psychology, I read the damning indictments of our ossified schools and the optimistic reports of new educational experiments sprouting everywhere. Later, during a short tenure as a school psychologist, I had the awful realization that most children in this particular school would be helped most if the principal could be counseled into some other profession. Still later, during a six month stay in London, our ten-year-

old son was able to attend a state-supported “informal” junior school, one of those schools everyone had been talking and writing about, where rabbits were on loan from the head mistress’s office and the most important school rule was that children were not to retrieve balls by climbing the drainpipes to the three-story high Victorian-era roof. Finally, between jobs and full of ideas, I opened a small, private middle school, one you will meet on these pages.

When I had to leave my school for Michigan, I became involved in Community High School as a parent and volunteer, then gradually in the other schools and programs described on these pages. This book came about because, adrift in a new community, I found Clonlara School in the Yellow Pages and dropped by to see what was going on. I have accompanied Japanese teachers and television crews to these schools where I have been an observer, participant, parent, volunteer, and even paid professional. I have tracked small children on their journeys to adulthood. I have followed published research and had access to files of test data and to unpublished evaluations of educational outcomes.

These particular innovative schools were selected because they: a) differ in organizational style but are similar in basic goals; b) were accessible and would tolerate me as a visitor; c) represent both public and private learning environments; and d) describe education for children from preschool through high school. Together the schools form a representative, although far from exhaustive, sample.

Similarly the research cited in answer to questions about alternative, open education is not exhaustive, but, overall, representative of the general findings. Easily executed, well-controlled experimental designs and open or “free” education tend to have antithetical philosophical foundations. The imaginative and time-consuming Eight-Year Study and the High/Scope research are significant exceptions.

I have tried to impart the atmosphere and flavor of these learning environments along with their philosophical foundations, their problems, and their potential. Although Japanese interest and concern were the impetus for this book, its contents may challenge Americans to think about our own schools.

Publisher Daikichi Suzuki, founder of the Japanese Free School Study Association, says, “We won’t copy your American free schools, but we can learn many things from you as we borrow your strength to change our education.” Often we fail to value our own strengths, including our diversity and flexibility. Since the mid-70s Community School District 4 in East Harlem has been practicing the ideal of allowing parents

to select the style of public school to best meet their children's needs. Now "schools of choice" are being presented as a real alternative to the traditional concept of neighborhood schools. Instead of searching for the one, single, all-encompassing "right" way to educate our children, we might learn from exploring these successful byways, by traveling off the beaten educational track.