



**Japanese Lessons: A Year in a Japanese School through the Eyes of an American Anthropologist and Her Children.** Gail R. Benjamin. New York: New York University Press, 1997. 262 pp.

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Benjamin conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Urawa, a central city of Saitama Prefecture, north of Tokyo, in order to find out "what really happens in Japanese schools" and to seek "paths for improvement in American education" (p. 23). She observed the classroom and school activities of a public elementary school to which she sent her two children (a fifth and a first grader); discussed with her children their experiences at school; carefully read various notices, notes, and letters brought home from the school; and interviewed teachers and parents.

Reading *Japanese Lessons*, I felt as if I was reviewing my own recent experiences with a public elementary school and a private day-care center as a father caring for two children, a fifth grader and a preschooler, while my wife conducted research in the United States for 10 months. The descriptions of backpacking, swimming lessons, overnight trips, and Sport Day, as well as those of daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly interactions and activities with the school and teachers, are very accurate and appropriate. They are also detailed enough for Benjamin's analysis and arguments. The topics do not stereotype Japanese society as homogeneous and harmonious.

Benjamin uses preschool cases to show that her findings at the elementary school make sense in the larger educational context. In so doing, she assumes the continuity from preschool to elementary school and uses other researchers' work so extensively that I sometimes lost the boundary between her and others' arguments. As to her assumption of the continuity, it would be useful to look more at the fact that there are crucial changes from the preschool stage to elementary school in children's self-identity as well as in the teacher-child relationship: for example, preschool teachers have no authority over children while elementary school teachers do.

There are some misleading and simply wrong descriptions of Japanese practices. Although they are not serious enough to undermine her argument, some of them are worth mentioning here to avoid further misperceptions: "The exam for all public high schools, then, is the same examination" (p. 208) should read "The exam for all public high schools *in the same prefecture*, then, . . . "; "In those [text] books illustrated with drawings . . . , the children and adults depicted do not look physically Japanese" (p. 125) is overemphasized and based on the assumption that only black, not gray or light brown, is a standard Japanese hair color; "Aliens of any sort, for example, cannot be



school teachers in Japan" (p. 214) is misleading and should be read as "There are school teachers who are aliens"; "*Shichi-go-san* . . . the ages of three and seven by boys and age five for girls" (p. 215) should be "*Shichi-go-san* . . . the ages of three and five by boys and ages three and seven for girls."

For the reader's research, the book is useful because it sensitively depicts almost every important aspect of the Japanese elementary school system, practices, and events. The reader can analyze and reanalyze his or her data on U.S. counterparts with the comparative eyes that Benjamin used. It is also useful for finding topics concerning Japanese public elementary school that further research would have to focus on. These include the concerns that parents of public elementary school children have recently developed over the quality of the public junior high school, the preparation from the third or fourth grade for the entrance examination to private junior high schools that are combined with senior high schools, and participation in PTA activities assisting with the school's events.

The book is also useful for readers' teaching. The suggestions that Benjamin makes in chapter 11 would be good topics for discussions concerning U.S. education: for example, less traveling between different classrooms and larger class size. Students can trace how these suggestions are drawn from the data on Japanese schools presented in the preceding ten chapters. These suggestions might not be so useful at the U.S. high school level because these are the factors that, I think, would make for a less creative and free classroom atmosphere than in Japanese high school. The same structural patterns can be observed from preschools through elementary school to junior and senior high schools. The meaning of such patterns, however, is differently shaped in each institutional context.

Overall, *Japanese Lessons* is a substantial contribution to the understanding of elementary schools in Japan. It is a good mirror to reflect upon U.S. education and a text to know how it would be constructively observed and evaluated. It shows the importance of a cultural dialogue and a cultural critique in endeavors of educational ethnography.

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