

THE STUDY OF CIVICS AROUND THE WORLD

EXAMPLE OF JAPANESE CIVICS AND VALUES

There is a fascinating diversity of the study of civics throughout the world. Most civilized nations have some form of a constitution, thus the study of civics. There are others that have had no written constitutions and do not seem to need one. A few who do not have them now might need them later. Other countries may have a constitution that is too complex, needing to simplify. The United States Constitution has had a fundamental impact in many countries around the world. Its original clarity and simplicity has been an inspiration to many nations, some of whom have copied the presidential system, the bicameral congress, the separation of powers (executive, legislative, and judicial) and the ideals of a democracy.

An example of another country's study of civics and values are described below. The excerpts are from an article about Japanese culture. This makes a good classroom discussion as you can highlight the similarities and differences in their core beliefs from our values. The 12 values listed in the chart would carry over well to the American society. Read to your students and have them comment on those "words to live by."

December 2015 - TOKYO —Japan is preparing to reintroduce the teaching of traditional Japanese ethics in schools, as the nation's conservatives seek to restore the values they say were rooted out during the U.S. occupation after World War II. The education initiative is part of an effort by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his conservative allies to push policies meant to cast Japan as a stronger, prouder and forward-looking country, one less apologetic for its history. That new assertiveness has sometimes provoked Japan's neighbors and riled Japanese who say the popular leader is rolling back the liberal values that have kept Japan free, safe and prosperous.

The dispute has flared over official visits to a controversial shrine honoring the nation's war dead, including convicted class-A war criminals, and the government's reinterpretation of the constitution to give the military more freedom to fight and operate overseas. On the education front, conservatives and liberals have rumbled over revisions to history textbooks and mandatory singing of the national anthem in schools. The new teaching initiative stems from the conservative view that Japanese people—especially youth—hold their country and its history in low regard due to too much focus in schools on Japan's wartime aggressions.

To counter that, Mr. Abe's government this year set education guidelines that encourage patriotism and espouse love of Japan's history, traditions and unique culture, including the ancient Shinto religion, as well as the importance of obeying rules, being kind and exerting self-control. The 1890 Imperial Rescript on Education and prewar ethics education are the bases for the new guidelines, which publishers are now incorporating into textbooks. The books will be used in new ethics classes to be taught in elementary and middle school starting in 2018 after a period of public comment and government approval.

Words to Live By

Emperor Meiji, below, issued the Imperial Rescript on Education in 1890 to address a perceived loss of traditional virtues in Japan due to the country's Westernization; his precepts are a basis for new education guidelines.



Photo: Newscom

- 1 Be filial to your parents**
- 2 Be affectionate to your brothers and sisters**
- 3 Be harmonious as husbands and wives**
- 4 Trust and be trusted by your friends**
- 5 Bear yourself in modesty and moderation**
- 6 Extend your benevolence to all**
- 7 Devote yourself to learning and gain an occupation**
- 8 Acquire knowledge and develop your talent**
- 9 Improve your character**
- 10 Work to promote public good**
- 11 Respect the constitution and observe the law**
- 12 Should emergency arise, offer yourselves courageously to the state**

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Mr. Abe's initiative is welcomed by many Japanese who see a link between the Western emphasis on personal freedom and a moral decay they say is afflicting the country's youth, as seen in rising cases of bullying, juvenile delinquency and classroom disorder. "Teachers and students have become equals, resulting in loss of authority in the classroom," said Shigeki Kaizuka, professor at Musashino University and a leading advocate of ethics education. "The classroom has been reduced to a jumble, creating room for bullying." But the new curriculum is also stoking fears.

The Japan Teachers' Union opposes the new curriculum, saying that evaluating students on traditional ethics is akin to forcing values on students, a spokesman, Hiroaki Akaike, said. The union contends that rather than focusing on teaching people to love the country, the government should concentrate its efforts on making Japan deserving of that love, he added. In one rural mountain-ringed elementary school in Ome City, a recent ethics class concerned "how to better understand each other." Mika Hakamada, the teacher, asked a class of sixth-graders to imagine a group of unfamiliar students angrily yelling at them from across a river. "How would you respond? Yell back? Ignore? Or ask them what they are saying?" A discussion followed, as Ms. Hakamada urged the students, "Don't try to give pleasing answers. Be honest."

While some teachers worry this freewheeling method of ethics instruction could suffer once a formal curriculum is introduced, others support it. Makoto Takagi, a high-school social-studies teacher in Kanagawa prefecture, said "learning to respect diverse values" may take a back to seat to keeping order in the classroom. "Without order in school, no studying or teaching is possible," he said. Opinion polls indicate a solid majority of Japanese support the idea of general ethics education, with respondents citing youth violence and the need for students to develop more empathy for others as reasons. The polls didn't address patriotism or respect for authority.

Driving Mr. Abe's efforts to cast Japan in a more positive light are the running disputes over wartime history with neighboring China and South Korea, which has led to "soul-searching over the national identity," said Shiro Takahashi, an education professor at Meisei University and an influential voice among conservatives. Ethics was considered the most important subject in schools during the imperial era. At its heart was the Imperial Rescript on Education, a document once considered sacred. It contained a wide range of Confucian virtues, and demanded devotion to the emperor and personal sacrifice for the state.

After the war, the U.S. occupation authorities scrapped the rescript and ethics education, which many saw as sources of the unthinking obedience and moral certitude that helped fuel Japan's militarism. In 1947, the postwar government passed the Fundamental Law on Education, designed to bolster the liberal, democratic values of the postwar pacifist constitution. Returning traditional ethics to schools has been a goal of Japan's conservatives ever since. A toned down ethics curriculum was reintroduced after the end of the occupation in 1958 and remains in place today. But the once-a-week course is ungraded and unstructured, and there are no textbooks.

In 2006, during his first term, Mr. Abe presided over the first-ever revision of the education law, opening the door to a return of traditional ethics. Love of the nation and respect for its traditions and culture were established as official goals of the Japanese education system. Atsuko Tsuruta, a retired professor of education at the University of the Sacred Heart in Tokyo, views the shift as a step backward. She recalls, with little affection, when Japanese schools emphasized respect for authority and rules, with large signs in schools that stated, "Obedience." "The prewar education praised obedience as a virtue, especially for women," she said. "People avoided expressing their opinions. Criticism was not encouraged." Ms. Tsuruta rejected the notion that classrooms have become too chaotic.

"That's what democracy means. Democracy is a messy thing," she said. "It is arrogant for adults to think children should be spared from dealing with confusion."

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