

# PLANTING SEEDS AND BEARING FRUIT: SWEDISH AND JAPANESE EDUCATOR PARTICIPATION IN A SYMPOSIUM OF PEDAGOGY DISCUSSIONS REGARDING SDG-INSPIRED CURRICULUM

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## Abstract

In the autumn of 2022, with a research grant from the Japanese Ministry of Education, we organized a symposium in Nagoya, Japan with Swedish and Japanese early education specialists. This collaboration was based on previous work that investigated ESD, aesthetic, and multicultural curriculum in Sweden and Japan (Morrone, Matsuyama, 2019 et al). This 2022 seminar week was created to provide an opportunity to have Swedish educators experience Japanese school curriculum, see the issues facing Japanese education today, and express their opinions and queries. The Swedish reactions to what they experienced in Japanese school observations tell much about what values Swedish society and culture aims to instill in the developing child. Similarly, the Japanese opinions of Swedish education observed shines a light on what are considered important goals for Japanese education. Additionally, our symposium invitees were given cultural tours prior to their school visits in order to gain some visceral insight into the historical and cultural environment that influences what school is in a particular society. In this way, the symposium provides a place and time to see the sort of educational realities both countries face, get a sense of how each society prepares the next generation of teachers, and motivates educators to imagine what challenges must be met. At the end of the week, both Japanese and Swedish educators saw similarities regarding changing demographics; all felt the need to create a platform for continued professional education for teachers, experts, and potentially, pre-service teachers. The following is a discussion of points of change and aspects of curricular development highlighted by the symposium.

**Keywords:** *Convention on the Rights of the Child, democracy, inclusion, multicultural education, SDGs, early childhood education, Japan, Sweden.*

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## 1. Swedish SDG Curriculum, the social environment, and notions of “Democracy” - some background

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular, social SDGs such as inclusiveness and multiculturalism, has long been present in the Swedish curriculum. Due to its relatively low population and great open spaces, a commitment to the preservation of the environment has long been a priority that the Swedish Ministry of Education promotes in schools and in turn, society. As for diversity issues, Sweden is not new to the idea of accepting newcomers. In the 1970's and 80's, political refugees from countries like Syria and Chile saw Sweden as a country very welcoming to newcomers. Simultaneously, European programs such as Erasmus that encourage the exchange of students among the European Union, founded greater cross-immigration within the European Union. All these factors have altered the look of the previous, more homogenous Scandinavian culture. However, the more recent intensification of the peak immigration of 2015, has brought more social tension with questions arising regarding assimilation. Of particular concern regards the notion of Swedish democracy and its ability to function for all citizens with equity. When questioning Swedish educators about what they felt was the most important goal of education, “teaching democratic values” is often cited

as the most valued. (Morrone & Matsuyama, 2013, 2022). Democracy, it seems, has different expectations depending on each society it inhabits.

Such values have inspired the Swedish Education Ministry to respond to demographic changes with directives that encouraged further educational research towards the creation of new programs. Swedish language classes for better acculturation, reassessment for student testing and placement, and the creation of mother-tongue programs\* were initiated. At the base lies the idea that for newcomers to participate in a democracy, they should be true participants in society. In order to do this, they should be comfortable in Swedish, and understand the values of the country's politics so that they can work for them, too. Also important is to ensure by some means that the newcomers are respected by the indigenous Swedes for the cultural heritage, customs, and religion that they bring to Sweden. As one principal explained to me, "It makes the country so much more interesting having all these new cultures!" (Morrone, Interview, 2011, 2022). However, even among a citizenry who tend to view immigration positively, the most recent immigration wave has created some questions within schools and communities that there was too little too late. Much of the responsibility for democratic values lies with the schools, rather than the newly arrived parents. How can schools ensure that democratic values are understood well when language and housing problems are not adequately addressed in the first place? The experience of Sweden and its history of recent immigration provides an example from which Japanese educators may benefit with their increasingly diverse social environment. For Swedish visitors to Japan, experiencing the Japanese perspective on immigration, diversity, and multiculturalism may provide a new perspective on how a non-European culture might address the present challenges.

## **2. Democracy in the Japanese society and school**

After World War II, a consensus among the members of the Allied Forces Occupation worried that the pre-war education system had been largely responsible for the growth of militarism under the Emperor's name. The allied occupation, led by the United States, decided that elements of democracy could be put into place systemically via land, economic, and education reforms. Regarding education, some of the main characteristics introduced were an American 6-3-3 public system, co-educational public schools to encourage better gender equality, a ban on religious studies in public schools to enforce separation of church and state, and grassroots organizations like the PTA (parent-teacher associations) were introduced to counter the local neighbourhood groups that had exerted influence during the war-time period. Since these occupation reforms, there has been little if any change in such democratic systems, which are still alive and well in the schools.

However successful democratic values like equity and individuality have been encouraged, election time never fails to surprise the world with the low voter turnout, which hovers near or above 50 percent (Japan Times, 2022). It should be noted that skepticism regarding democracy is in a purely political sense. Socially, ideals of fair and equal treatment under the law is certainly alive and well in society, and equity issues are clearly supported by the Japanese Ministry of Education. That being said, there is some question as to whether all the more modern aspects of democracy are at work in a child's development at the individual school level. Even though the Ministry of Education encourage schools to have curriculum that focuses on "critical thinking skills." (Ministry of Education, 2022, Vickers, 2019.) the emphasis on democracy continues to focus on the development of human capital to contribute to society rather than social equity issues or developing self expression. This is clearly witnessed in the lack of focus on such issues in teacher education programs. One main reason for this harken back to a general distrust in society of passionate ideals; in particular those relating to religion and politics. Similarly, individual choice may be viewed as a potential danger to harmony, making it difficult to introduce activities in schools that overemphasize such personal freedoms. Japan, like anywhere, is a nation of individuals with desires and passions. That one is reluctant to express them easily suggests a compromise between individual expression and the ideal of the smooth-running society for which Japan prides itself.

## **3. Conclusion. Reassessment of cultural ideals regarding democracy in Japan**

Discussions from our 2022 symposium highlight how in Sweden, democratic attitudes and values are considered characteristics so essential for healthy societal function that they are integrated from a child's first entry into society, at preschool. This notion reiterated by each of the Swedish experts above, suggests that the notion of democracy is at its core, valued in both social and individual ways. Individual rights, thoughts, and opinions create the platform from which a child comes to understand and express his or her passions and ambitions. School is also the place where relations with other children, teachers, and members of the community expand the child's egoistic world and where decisions are made together with others towards common goals. The child, guided by and with others, comes to understand the importance of

participation in all things social, and political, securing the goal of the Ministry of Education to democratize the child in the true sense of the word---as a full-fledged member of a multicultural, inclusive society deserving of full rights.

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