

Exploring Home Education in Japan

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Abstract

Homeschooling is very unusual in Japan and therefore many Japanese people are not familiar with the idea at all. This paper presents the definition of homeschooling and some basic principles such as why parents decide to teach at home and what group of people homeschool the most. It also explores the advantages of teaching children at home instead of sending them to school.

Homeschooling is not new even though many Japanese people have not heard of it and therefore do not know what it is. There are a great number of books written in English about homeschooling and this short paper does not intend to cover all areas of the subject. The author will relate his experiences of homeschooling in order to give the reader who is not familiar with the practice a better understanding of it. It is a subjective study. In this paper the author will examine several aspects (who, what, where, why and how) of home education and the implications of its use in Japan.

A basic definition of homeschooling is parents educating a child at home without any involvement from the local school. Homeschooling is also called home education and that may be a better term since the children learn at home and have nothing to do with the school system. The author uses both terms interchangeably in this paper. In Japan there are many *hikikomori* which is a term used for children who do not attend school and withdraw from social life. *Hikikomori* are not homeschoolers. They do not attend school for various reasons, but are not homeschoolers because their parents want them to attend school. Parents of homeschooled children want to teach their children themselves and feel that their influence is most important. Homeschooled children are usually very outgoing and socially well-adjusted, which is quite different from *hikikomori*.

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Though Japanese schools usually provide an excellent education for a majority of the students, Japan could benefit from more choices in terms of education. In the American way of thinking, the more choices a person has, the better off he/she is. In Japan as in most countries, there are private schools, but they are expensive and in the case of smaller cities, are nonexistent. If you live in a small city in Japan, the educational choices are limited. In Japan most elementary school students go to the school that is closest to their home. In large cities in Japan, parents have the option of sending their children to a local school or a private one. In the small city of Kitami where the author lives, there are no private elementary schools. Parents have one choice - the school that is in their area. Home education provides one more option for parents in Japan.

Participants

Parents decide to send their children to school or to *continue* to raise and educate them at home. The word *continue* is in italics because for the first several years of a child's life the parents are the ones teaching them and setting an example for them. Home education is a continuation of the parents being the main educators of their children.

For most families who are educating at home, the majority of the teaching is done by the mothers. Of course this is not true in all families, but most. If the mother is doing most of the hands-on teaching then what is the father's responsibility? Working to bring home an income is usually the father's first and most important role. In order to help out their wives, some husbands will do more housework to alleviate some of the pressure that the wife is under because of teaching at home and keeping a house. Rick Boyer, a home education expert with many years of experience writes, "Dad is to motivate his children by encouraging them when they're headed in the right direction, comforting them when they're down and teaching them the lessons of life from his own experience." (Boyer, 1997, p. 24). Fathers can also complement what the mother is doing. This may be teaching one subject that the mother feels inadequate to teach or by teaching their children a skill. Another one of the father's roles should be to encourage the mother in what she is doing. She needs to know that the father cares about how well the children are learning and to be appreciated. (Boyer, p. 27). Of course the father can also teach a subject that he is stronger in teaching in the evening after work. (Boyer, p. 60). Another important thing that a father can teach is not an actual subject. It is teaching their children character.

(Boyer, p. 59). In the author's family, the husband has two main roles. He teaches the children how to read and write in English. He also takes his children outside for physical exercise. This is important for the children who spend much time inside the house and do not walk regularly to school. Getting them outside to run and play in the park is good for them mentally and essential for them physically. It is also good for the mother who needs some time by herself.

There is a common denominator of a majority of homeschooling families. Many homeschool parents are Christian. The homeschool movement had a resurgence in the USA in the 1970s because parents wanted to instill traditional Christian values in their children and to unite families (Klicka, p.1). Homeschooling is a means to an end. "The end is that their children will come to know Jesus Christ as their personal Savior and live with Him as lord of their lives." (Klicka, 2002, p. 2). Many homeschooling parents believe this and emphasize this in their homeschooling. It is the same in Japan. Many of the homeschooling parents are Christians. One reason there are so few homeschoolers in Japan may be because there are so few Christians in Japan. No one knows the exact number of homeschoolers in Japan and the government does not keep track.

There is no one place where home-educated children learn. Each family has a different home and different spaces for the children. Some parents have their children do their work at a desk, while others do their learning at a kitchen or dining room table. In the author's family, most of the studying and writing takes place in the living room. Home-educated children do not go to their local school at all.

Reasons Parents Homeschool

In this section the author looks at just a few of the reasons why parents choose to homeschool. There are many different reasons why parents choose to educate their children at home. According to Ray (2015), most parents decide to educate at home for more than one reason. Each set of parents has their own reasons for choosing to homeschool. Parents know that all children do not learn in the same way. Teaching at home allows parents to use a curriculum which they feel is best for their child. Some parents make the decision to educate at home because their child is doing poorly in school. Some parents take their children out of school for fear of their safety or because their child needs special help because of a learning disability. Other parents are not satisfied with the curriculum that is being

taught in their local schools. According to Perez-Litwin (2011), reasons for an increase in homeschooling numbers in the USA include:

- A desire to provide religious or moral instruction
- A dissatisfaction with academic instruction
- Nontraditional educational approaches in public schools
- The child has special needs or physical/mental health problems

Many parents teach their children at home because they know their children the best and have decided that they could do a better job teaching their child one-on-one than giving that responsibility to a teacher who has to teach 20 or 30 students.

Christian parents often look to the book of Proverbs in the bible that has many verses exhorting parents to teach their children. One proverb reads: "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6). This is yet another reason why parents choose to home educate. They believe in the bible which tells them that they and they are alone are responsible to train their children.

Parents need to spend time with their children. Some mothers of infants and toddlers do stay home with their children, but many others send their children to daycare so that they can work outside the home. Homeschooling parents have decided that spending a great deal of time with their children is in everyone's best interest. Growing children need time when their parents pay attention to them individually (Marshner, p. 145). Some mothers found that when their children went to school, they were not able to spend very much time together. Their time before going to school and after school was so short and was not considered quality time (Shackelford and White, p.13).

How Parents Homeschool

One of the main tenets of homeschooling is for parents to teach their children by their own example because children learn by example. Children do as their parents do (Marshner, p. 103). If children are at daycare or elementary school for many hours a day, they are learning from the example of other children. Other 5 year olds or other 9 year olds are not the best example. Parents who educate their children at home, want their children to learn mostly from their example. One area is language. The author has heard that many children pick up bad language when they go to school. They learn that by example.

There is not just one way to teach children at home. Many parents use a curriculum that is designed for learning at home. Parents can add or delete parts that do not work for their situation or fit into their children's learning style. Choosing a curriculum can be a very daunting experience for first timers. This is because a parent may not know when to start using a curriculum and they may not know the learning styles of the child. They may lack experience. The author of this paper read an article that advised parents not to buy a curriculum too early for his children because many parents think they *have* to buy something and often times do not use the expensive materials they have purchased. Many parents use the eclectic method which is not following one set curriculum, but using "a little bit of this and a little bit of that". Some families use what is called "school in a box". This is a curriculum with many of the same ideas found at school. Each household is different in how they teach and learn. It depends on the parents and the children. Though each family and therefore each homeschooling situation is different, in many families an observer may see some common denominators such as bible reading/study, doing household chores, and an emphasis on obeying their parents.

Selling homeschooling curricula is a big business in the USA because there are so many children who are being home educated in that country. Because of that great number, there are many companies and organizations creating curricula designed especially for homeschooling families. These companies include Sonlight Curriculum, A BEKA Book, and KONOS Curriculum. There are many homeschooling conferences around the USA every year and all of these conferences include a venue for companies to sell curricula to homeschooling parents. There are not many Japanese homeschooling companies that have curriculum in Japanese, but there are books from American homeschooling companies translated into Japanese. Also many Japanese companies sell supplemental workbooks for children to be used along with or in addition to their regular school textbooks. These could be used by parents for children being taught at home. Then there is a wealth of homeschool activities, worksheets and ideas available on the internet specifically for homeschooled children. Some of these are free and most offer free samples of lessons that a parent can purchase. There are also homeschooling organizations that give support to their members. Some examples include: Chea Japan/Chea Nippon, Homeschool Support Association (Hosa), Association of Homeschoolers in Christ (AHSIC).

Homeschooling in Japan

As mentioned earlier, Japan people would benefit from having more choices about educating their children. Most Japanese think there is only one way to educate children and that is sending their child to school. Because home education is not so common in Japan, many people have never even heard of it. In informal questionnaires given to college students, the author found that over several years, more than 90% of first year students at his college did not know what the term homeschooling meant. When this author tells Japanese people that he and his wife educate their two children at home, most people say, "What is that?" Once it is explained the people then say, "How can you do that? I thought you *had* to send your children to school." The law in Japan states that all children must be educated. The law does not state that all children must attend school. Because the law is written that way, children living in Japan can be educated at home.

Japanese people often ask homeschooling parents about socialization. They think that it is good for Japanese young people to go to school to become socialized with other students who are the same age. The author has already explained that the example of peers is not usually that beneficial. Also in Japanese schools, students spend a great deal of time with children of the exact same age. There is little communication between different age groups. For home-educated children, parents include their children in their outings and in this way, children can get experience relating to people of all age groups. Of course spending time with older and younger siblings is also an important part of homeschooling.

Japanese parents who have decided to educate their child at home need to contact their local board of education and probably also the school in their area. Elementary school children are often sent information about the local elementary school and required health checks long before the first day of class. Before the first year of the author's child entering elementary school, the author's wife contacted the local school and also the city board of education. Dealing with the board of education may be difficult because as stated earlier, many do not know about home education and they think it is against the law. Since the author's son was the first one in the city to be educated at home, the board of education in the author's city called Tokyo to find about precedents. After several telephone conversations, the local board of education asked to come to the author's home for an interview. After the interview, the representatives from the board of education agreed

to let the author and his wife educate their children at home. The officials asked for only one thing - to keep the boy's name on the official school roster. The author guesses that the reason for this is because the school receives money for each name on the list. When the author's second child started to receive information about entering first grade, the author's wife called the board of education again. The second time was easier because the board of education was already familiar with homeschooling and the author's family.

Children who go to school face peer pressure in many areas. For example they face peer pressure about clothes and in owning things such as hand-held video games. The author's children do not face that same pressure because they do not attend school. His two children do not own any video games and they are not pressured to get one. These days children often bring their hand-held video game machines to the park and sit in groups and play video games. The author's son will sometimes watch the game of one of the other boys, but he will not get involved with the video games at all. The author is glad that his two children do not have to face peer pressure about owning things.

Some Japanese parents who decide to homeschool experience opposition from one or both sets of grandparents. The reasons differ, but may include lack of knowledge of homeschooling, the children looking different and not participating in school events which grandparents think are important.

Bullying is a big problem in Japan and in severe cases even leads to children committing suicide. Children who are educated at home do not experience bullying. A son of an acquaintance of the author was educated at home throughout most of elementary school. In his first year of junior high school, he was bullied from April to July. In August when he returned to school, he decided to change to a church school. The author believes that since this young man was homeschooled for the first several years of elementary school, he knew that there was more than one way to learn. He did not have to stay in his bad situation. He knew there were more options available for himself and he decided to move to a school that was run by members of a church group.

Children who are home educated in Japan do miss out on participation in such school events as sports day, the school performance, opening and closing ceremonies, school festival, etc. These are part of all Japanese school children's experience. Usually most homeschooling parents

do not feel that these activities are important enough to send their children to school. The shared experience is not more important than the other reasons they chose to keep their children at home.

Advantages of Homeschooling

The author of this paper homeschools his children along with his wife and therefore knows many of the advantages that homeschooling offers. One is that the family as a unit is strengthened because of the large amount of time spent together. In Japan many families are separated because of the father's occupation. This phenomenon is called "business bachelor" and is harmful for families. Companies or organizations ask people who want to get promoted to move to other cities for extended periods of time. If the father gets transferred, the wife and children often stay in the city where the house is so that the children do not have to change schools. Since homeschooling can be done anywhere, families could move together and stay intact. The flexibility of homeschooling is a very appealing.

Field trips and travel can be done during low peak times that fit into the family's schedule. As a foreigner who lives in Japan, the author tries to take his family back to his native country at least once a year. Trying to take a family on an international trip only during school vacations is not easy because of the short time frame and expense. Homeschooling allows a family to travel during inexpensive times and allows for extended trips as well.

Another advantage for this author's children is that they are bilingual and not afraid or embarrassed to use their English inside and outside the home. Japanese school children who speak a language in addition to Japanese are often pressured not to use it because they may appear different from other students. The author's children do not face that pressure and therefore their ability and opportunity to speak in both Japanese and English is strengthened through homeschooling.

Individualized attention is another great aspect of home education. Parents know their children better than anyone and homeschooled parents soon learn their children's strengths and weaknesses as well as learning styles. Because of this individualized attention, homeschooled children often go through material more quickly than their peers who attend school. It is not unusual for homeschooled children to be using books or learning materials from higher grade levels.

The Author's Own Experience Homeschooling his Children

The author of this paper homeschools his two children along with his wife. The wife does a majority of the teaching. At the time of this writing, the author has a son who is eight years old and a 2nd year elementary school student and a daughter who is 6 years old and will be a 1st year elementary school student in April 2015. The author's wife teaches the son and daughter in the morning starting at 10am. She starts off with singing Christian songs and the children take turns reading a short bible passage. The rest of the time is spent teaching math, Japanese reading and writing and other subjects. The subjects that are studied each day varies. This schedule is followed on weekdays. The author's wife uses a wide variety of textbooks. She uses textbooks provided by the local elementary school as well as ones that were purchased from the United States. The author teaches English reading and writing. There is no set time for this. Usually the author listens to each child read a short story book from a set of graded readers which has been borrowed from the library. The author listens to and corrects his son while reading. He also teaches the pronunciation of words as his son comes across new words in the books. This is done early in the morning while the author is eating breakfast or in the evening after dinner. The author's son has never taken a test and therefore his progress compared to other students cannot be gauged. The author and his wife realize that their children may be behind other Japanese students academically, but are not concerned about that at this point. The two children are very social persons and can talk quite easily with people of any age. They are not hesitant to ask people who they know or who they do not know what they are doing. When they are around other children they have a great time interacting with them through play and conversation.

Conclusion

This paper presents a basic outline of homeschooling principles for the reader who is not familiar with them. The author states that having more educational options is good for Japanese people. If a child is not doing well in one school, a change may be beneficial. Moving to a different school is not always an option, but learning at home is always available. Homeschooling can strengthen the family unit. Homeschooling has many advantages and the future of the home-educated Japanese child is bright.

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