The meaning of culture dissemination in Japanese intergenerational learning
Il senso della disseminazione culturale per l'apprendimento intergenerazionale in Giappone

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ABSTRACT
Japan is one of many countries in the world facing the increasingly serious issues of an ageing population combined with a very low birth rate. The impact upon Japanese society of this situation is enormous in both the medium and long term, and a number of measures have been introduced, both by local and central governments, to try and cope. At the same time, over the past decade serious crimes against and by children have also caused grave concerns. In this context, intergenerational learning has been strongly encouraged in the hope that it may not only resolve communication breakdown among the different generations but may also create a wide range of spin-off effects. One of the conspicuous features in Japan is that intergenerational learning has the strong potential to work as a means of culture dissemination from the elderly to small children. This study intends to clarify general trends in Japanese intergenerational learning by explaining why the latter is being focused upon in the present day, and above all, to demonstrate through analysis of papers and case studies how the dissemination of culture is of importance to this country. It is indicated that culture dissemination could serve as the driving force to promote intergenerational learning, to maintain and/or revitalize social solidarity and strengthen the community bond.

Il Giappone è uno dei tanti paesi al mondo che si trova attualmente ad affrontare un cresciente e preoccupante invecchiamento della popolazione con un basso tasso di nascite. L'impatto sulla società giapponese di tale siutazione è enorme sia nel medio e lungo termine; un certo numero di misure sono state introdotte sia a livello del governo locale sia a livello centrale, per tentare di far fronte a tale situazione. Nel contempo, negli ultimi dieci anni gravi reati contro i bambini hanno causato gravi preoccupazioni. In questo contesto, l'apprendimento intergenerazionale è stato fortemente incoraggiato nella speranza che possa risolvere non solo la comunicazione tra le diverse generazioni, ma che esso possa diventare motore di una vasta gamma di effetti socio-culturali emergenti. Una delle caratteristiche evidenti in Giappone è che l'apprendimento intergenerazionale ha un forte potenziale per fungere da mezzo di diffusione della cultura dagli anziani ai bambini. Questo studio si propone di chiarire le tendenze generali in materia di apprendimento intergenerazionale nel panorama giapponese, dimostrando attraverso l'analisi di documenti e studi di casi come la diffusione della cultura sia un'importante risorsa per il Giappone. Più specificamente, la disseminazione della cultura potrebbe costituire la forza trainante per mantenere e / o rivitalizzare la solidarietà sociale e rafforzare il legame della comunità.

KEYWORDS
Intergenerational Learning, Culture Dissemination, Social Solidarity, Community Bond.
Apprendimento intergenerazionale, disseminazione culturale, solidarietà, legami comunitari.

* The materials written by Japanese ministries and authors listed above are originally written in Japanese and if the English title is not specified in their original materials, it is translated by the author.

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Introduction

In 2012 the longevity rate in Japan had reached 83.18 for men and 86.41 for women (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2013). In one sense this is a favourable phenomenon, as it ensures that society can make use of the resources of a large number of people who have retired yet are still full of energy. However, the most serious problem in this country is that the ageing population coincides with a serious decline in the number of children, owing to a low birth rate and a low level of immigration. It is estimated that the median age in Japan will reach 45.8 as of 2013 (Central Intelligence Agency, 2013) and that the total population – 127 million as of 2012 – will be reduced to 86.7 million by 2060 (Rachman, 2013). Facing this demographic trend, Japanese society has to consider better management of its human resources so that it may cope with unexpected challenges in the near future.

In terms of education, the actual number of children per classroom in Japan has diminished over the last decade, reducing from 25.0 in 2000 to 18.7 in 2011 (the OECD average was from 19.2 in 2000 to 16.1 in 2011; OECD, 2013). At a glance, it can be predicted that the educational environment for children in general has been improving, since more attention has been given to individuals. However, from time to time, serious crimes against and by children (including theft, abduction, sexual assault, murder and suicide) and a lack of proper home education owing to the increase in nuclear families and single households have been reported in governmental policy documents, especially since 2000 (Yamamoto, 2004). It is indicated that this is due to a lack of social solidarity and the decrease in the power of the community for taking care of each other.

Bearing all these factors in mind, the central government has since 2000 launched interesting projects to promote intergenerational learning, although activities of a similar kind started long before, conducted not only by local governments but also non-profit organisations/NPOs and volunteer groups etc. Currently, a variety of different activities for intergenerational learning have been taking place across the country, generating a wide range of spin-off effects. One conspicuous feature is that, in most parts of the country, either in big cities or in rural areas, practical activities have been implemented demonstrating the importance of the role of cultural dissemination, as it can promote the wider potential of each of the local communities. This ongoing study intends to illustrate general trends in Japanese intergenerational learning in recent years, in order to clarify the meanings of culture dissemination in Japanese society by employing analysis of papers and case studies.

1. Backgrounds to Japanese intergenerational learning

During the years of steep economic growth in the 1960s, Japanese society encountered industrial structure change, which deeply impacted upon relationships among family members (Kanamori, 2012). In the old days, it was natural to see up to three generations living under one roof, and various aspects of tangible and intangible culture, including many practical aspects of daily life, were passed down from the old to the young. However, as Japanese society experienced the rapid migration of rural populations to urban centres and the rise of women's social advancement, family configurations became diversified, resulting in a sharp increase in nuclear families and single households. This eventual-

ly led to the deterioration of social solidarity and of traditional roles which were undertaken by three-generation families in the old days.

It is from this context that an idea of intergenerational learning was initiated, and therefore in most cases, intergenerational learning in Japan refers to learning passed from the elderly to children and vice versa, rather than between parents and children. Since the 1970s, though not on a large scale, activities for intergenerational learning have been implemented by local governments and volunteer groups, and this trend was sustained until the 1990s (*Ibid*., p.70). In 1997, while the central government started to discuss education for the 21st century, it was suggested by the Central Education Committee that intergenerational learning should be more focused within society, in view of the deterioration of home education (Central Education Committee within the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 1997). At the same time, facing the increase in the number of crimes against and by children, the question of how to protect children and secure their environment received extensive attention both from central government and from parents. For example, according to a questionnaire survey conducted by the *Dai-ichi* Research Institute (Matoba, 2007), approximately 80% of parents confessed that they feel insecure if their children go out on their own, and that there are few social spaces where children can play without fear. By 2000 it became a prime concern of central government, in response to the anxieties of parents, to protect children and secure their time after school hours so that they can spend it without fear. It was concluded that the problems could not be addressed only by family members, but should be considered as a community issue; therefore the issue had to be resolved by all available members of the local communities (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2013).

Having this in mind, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) launched measures to work out these issues surrounding children. One step was to strengthen the ties among schools, families and communities. 'Headquarters' were created in each of the local communities in order to support children after school hours, and they invited a variety of people from local governments and from among the public to participate. The number of headquarters of this kind reached 3527 across the country, and they adopted the role of discussing issues and finding solutions for problems surrounding children Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2013). Another step was to initiate a three-year (2004-2007) pilot project called 'the project for extra-curricular classroom activities for children outside school hours/PEC'[1]. Since then, intergenerational learning has become more popular across the nation. Some schools have introduced PECs funded by the central government, while others have introduced similar projects by themselves in cooperation with local government and citizens in the local communities.

1 Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (2013). Projects for After School Activities. Retrieved September 10, 2013, from <http://manabi-mirai.mext.go.jp/houkago/about.html>. Also, this English abbreviation, PEC was created by the author for the convenience of this paper and it is not used in Japan.

2. Project of intergenerational learning by the central government (PECs)

The idea of PECs is to utilize classrooms left empty due to the decrease in the number of children in recent years, and to invite local people of various ages and backgrounds outside school hours to the classrooms and ask them to provide local children with their knowledge and expertise through face-to-face communication and/or instructional courses based on their specialty knowledge, on a voluntary basis. This may take place both after school hours and at weekends, and the content is left to the discretion of each of the local communities. Several different roles are proposed for local people in this three-year project. Coordinators are assigned within each PEC in order to organise actual/practical learning as well as liaise with local government. In the actual school setting, learning consultants, instructors, security guards and volunteers are assigned to look after children from different perspectives. The backgrounds of adult participants greatly vary (Systems Research & Development Institute of Japan, 2008), but those working as pure volunteers are mostly housewives and elderly people. On the other hand, co-ordinators, instructors, security guards and consultants are gathered, having diverse backgrounds, mainly aged from their 40s to 60s. In middle-sized cities, people aged over 70 years tend to be involved; while in rural areas it is the younger generation. The underlying principle in PEC's is that it is necessary for children to have a 'rich' relationship with people of different ages if their parents want them to stay calm, relaxed and to feel safe (Saruwatari, & Sato, 2011, p.53).

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW) had been introducing a different day-care project, called 'Club for children after school-hours' to support children aged under 10 whose parents are not at home after school hours, and to provide living space throughout the year. This club activity has existed for more than 40 years and has long been regarded as having an important role in society (Morishita & Matsuura, 2011). Facing the new trends in intergenerational learning, the MHLW has shown a deep understanding of the MEXT's three-year project, and has agreed with the cooperation on PECs for the following years. Since 2007, co-funded by both of the ministries, the MEXT's original project has been extensively proposed as 'the extra-curricular classroom plan for children outside school hours'. Under this new project, it was expected that existing PECs by MEXT, and long-standing day-care projects by MHLW should be 'integrated' by combining their managements to secure all the children in the community, no matter to what extent their parents could look after them (*Ibid*.p.136). However in most parts of the country, a blind eye was turned to future trouble. In most of the communities PECs did not blend in harmoniously, or rather, the role of PECs tended to be confined only to providing educational activities after school hours, while the role of activities promoted by MHLW was intended, from the perspective of welfare, to protect children by operating throughout the year while their parents were working. Therefore, it is in most cases regarded that both services are essentially different, and therefore they are still provided separately today in many parts of the country (Morishita & Matsuura, *op. cit*., p.139).

3. General features and effects of intergenerational learning

As of 2009, the percentage of schools participating in PECs had reached 38.5% (88.6% in urbanised areas) (Nishimura, 2013). The length of learning was 118.8 days per year at average. Some 10376 of PECs were held all over the country as of 2013,

and about 80% of the PECs were held within school buildings. The project thus eventually generated a large number of positive effects upon all those involved (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2013). For children, aside from providing secure space, it facilitated understanding and respect for people of different ages, efficient use of time and space, helped them become more patient, increased their willingness to look after smaller children, helped them become calmer and brighter and to do homework and housework spontaneously, encouraged playing outside, and reduced interest in playing games inside etc. For parents, it fostered raised awareness of the local community, the need to give children more time to experience something new and to communicate with people of different ages, helped them in finding unexplored talents of children through the eyes of others, and reducing anxieties about children, etc. For volunteers, the experience of socialising with local children has ultimately led to their lifelong learning through the preparation and practice of their instructions. For the whole community, it more or less contributed to improving networking between different stakeholders and organisations, utilizing human resources and enhancing the skills required for educating children as a whole.

In terms of content, a wide variety of creative activities were produced. According to the statistics of a nationwide survey (Systems Research & Development Institute of Japan, Op.cit., pp.23-230.), the most popular activities included: sports (90.7%), making things (87.3%), free activities (75.8%), old games (74.3%), supplementary learning for school education (63.2%), reading (59.1%), cooking and/or housekeeping (47.3%), nature experience (43.9%), preparing and participating in traditional events (31.4%), scientific experiments (25.7%), ICT (19.3%), agriculture and/or vocational experience (19.1%), cleaning (12%), having rest (11.1%), volunteering activities (8%), eating together (5.7%) and playing with infants (4.1%). Among these activities, one of the conspicuous features is that intergenerational learning has the strong potential for working as 'culture dissemination' from the elderly to small children. In fact, most activities such as making things, traditional games, cooking, preparing and participating in traditional events etc. obviously contain this element, and in fact, some of these activities can be traced back more than 400 years.

4. Reasons for stressing 'culture dissemination' in Japan

Originally, aside from basic education in the school curriculum, local tradition and culture have been naturally handed down over the generations at home and outside in each of the local communities through people's daily lives throughout the nation's 2000-year history without the interference of the central government. In a way it is a quite recent phenomenon that central government has realized that local tradition can no longer be inherited by the next generation without intentionally making policies for preserving it and introducing nation-led programmes for maintaining and further developing it with appropriate funding. This is due to change of lifestyles, urbanisation and a decrease in the number of heirs of local tradition, especially in rural areas.

In January 2008, the central government therefore proposed the improvement of education by nourishing the nation's long-standing tradition and cultural activities, in the Policy Report of the Central Education Committee (Central Education Committee within the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2008, p.57). In March of the same year, the government revised

the guidelines of the school curriculum so that each school could put more emphasis on preserving traditions and culture through introducing the content of traditional elements in some school subjects. This political focus has been widely welcomed across the nation, as it promotes the existing activities of PECs while generating a number of spin-off effects as follows (Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, 2013):

First, it has started to be taken as essential that young people understand their own values, culture and traditions when communicating with people from different countries, thus gaining trust from them. Second, although most of the local communities have strong and precious local traditions which have been rooted in particular areas for more than 300-400 years, many of them have not been able to find appropriate heirs of local tradition, especially in rural areas – and there has been a breakdown of communications between the generations. Consequently it was anticipated that fostering this project could solve these extended problems. Third, it is regarded as essential to revitalise local communities and to bring out love for the local community. Fourth, it has begun to be considered that local tradition can also take a role in protecting and maintaining land as well as preserving the original landscape. Fifth, community bonds have been strengthened by improving social solidarity while exposing the community's identity. Sixth, the sharing of many activities among people of different ages has had the effect of training the next generation, through whom traditions can be handed over again to the next generation. Seventh, the policy has also worked to develop relationships between different communities. Eighth, the policy could also create new technology which could promote the circulation of resources, especially in the fields of agriculture, forestry and fishery. Last, the retaining of traditional culture could be a precious resource for making local special products, as well as conserving local techniques and maintaining local environments. Thus, culture dissemination could serve as the driving force to promote intergenerational learning, and for maintaining and/or revitalizing social solidarity and strengthening community bonds.

5. Good Examples

A large number of good practices have been reported in many different parts of the country, and in most cases culture dissemination has been treated as a core principle in order to maintain, arrange and revitalize the traditions rooted in each of the communities. In other words, dissemination of culture is regarded as something which restores the centripetal force of local communities.

One example can be found at *Nishi* primary school in *Miyoshi*-City, *Tokushima Prefecture*, in South-Western Japan (Education Board of Miyoshi City, Tokushima Prefecture, 2011). Since PECs began, the school has been very active in conducting different kinds of programmes, especially in terms of preserving local traditions, including the performance of traditional plays, arrangement of local flowers in locally made traditional wooden boxes, cooking traditional foods, etc., and through inviting professionals in many fields who live in the local community. The school also promotes activities to visit every single household of elderly people living in the local areas. All the activities were highly acclaimed and the school was awarded a prize by the MEXT in 2010 as one of the most brilliant schools to have introduced several interesting activities through utilizing PEC.

Another example is called '*Bansyu Kabuki*' which is rooted in *Taka* town in *Bansyu* area, in the south-western part of *Hyogo* Prefecture in western Japan, with 300 years of history (Education Board of Taka Town, Hyogo Prefecture, 2013). Generally, *Kabuki* is a widely known traditional drama performed by male actors, which can be traced back 400 years. In the case of '*Bansyu Kabuki*', it had a feature which played in agricultural villages, not in big cities. In recent years there had been a lack of heirs and its tradition was about to disappear. A local primary school focused attention on this and set up a club to retain this tradition. At the beginning, it was just a club to enable school children to practice '*Bansyu Kabuki*', having been trained by professional *Kabuki* actors, but latter the club invited various people who had an interest in preserving this tradition, including graduates of that school. Nowadays, club members of various ages practice it for their shows while studying or working during the daytime. Through these activities, local people from different backgrounds have developed trusting relationships and regained their self-esteem.

6. Future challenges

In promoting intergenerational learning, the main educational problems have been addressed and at the same time future challenges have been pointed out.

First, the most serious problem lies in personnel acquisition and the need for appropriate training (Matoba, *Op. cit.*, p.41). According to a nationwide survey, most PECs confess they are suffering from chronic staffing shortages, due to the unpredictable number of children participating, unstable working days, uncertain mobility of participants, etc. Lack of sufficient guidelines for ensuring the quality of coordinators, consultants, guardians and instructors is another problem surrounding PECs. Due to this, all those involved in activities tend to lack proper understanding of each participant. Above all, deficient knowledge about children who are in need of special attention has caused serious problems in most cases. As a result, some children pay no attention to these activities, while others express that although they enjoy the atmosphere of sharing their time with the elderly, they would prefer to communicate with someone closer to their age. In other words, knowledge deficiency in terms of psychology, pedagogy, sociology, architecture, management etc., has confined the scope and potential of this project. Due to this, the purpose of PECs can be easily blurred.

Second, the problem of how to set aside a space for children after school hours is often pointed out (Saruwatari & Sato Op. cit., pp.58-60). Owing to the lack of consideration of this, programs of this kind just tend to be taken as somewhere for children to feel safe and to learn about something. However, these programs can be a space in which children can broaden their viewpoints while communicating with different kinds of people in the local community. They could also be a space for children to develop their knowledge about where they live, improve their communication skills and build their physical strength, aside from the school curriculum. Thus, although the programs by nature contain many precious elements for children, this aspect has not received serious consideration. Moreover, they could be a hub of local human resources, by sharing the idea of raising children from different backgrounds by all available community members. Therefore, more attention should be paid to this opportunity, both in theoretical and practical terms.

Third, the fact that a proper network has not been developed among differ-

ent stakeholders could cause serious problems (Nishimura, *Op. cit.,* p.218). In fact, since the mobility of participants has been promoted (especially after 2007 when the MHLW agreed to cooperate in implementing the MEXT's idea of PECs) it in some cases has become difficult to estimate the number of children and local volunteers who participate each day. It then eventually became difficult for some children to feel safe and to hold a sense of belonging in such an unstable space. Thus, inadequate relationships between those involved sometimes caused mistrust, which could hinder further development. In such cases, lack of understanding and cooperation by parents often occur. It could also be the case that there has not been enough discussion between those involved in PECs and those involved in similar programs conducted by local governments, NPOs, volunteer groups etc.

Conclusions

Japan currently features as one of the countries facing the most serious concerns of rapid aging and very low birth rate. Facing this serious demographic trend, its society has to consider better management of its human resources in order that it can cope with unexpected challenges in the near future. At the same time, it has been pointed out that serious crimes against and by children have caused grave concerns over the last decade, due to a lack of solidarity in the local community. In this context, intergenerational learning has been strongly encouraged, which produces a wide range of spin-off effects on all those involved. Among these different effects, it is suggested in this country that intergenerational learning could work as a means of culture dissemination from the elderly to small children. The main reason for this is that it could generate positive attitudes among the young, allowing them to understand their own values, culture and traditions. It could thus be a good opportunity to find heirs of local tradition, and could give clues to overcoming the breakdown of communication between the generations. It could bring out love for locality; it could expose community identity; it could work to enhance relationships between different communities; it could create new technology which promotes resource circulation, etc. Thus, cultural dissemination holds "meaning" in many senses, serving as the driving force to promote intergenerational learning, to maintain and/or revitalize social solidarity and strengthen the community bonds etc. However, looking at the situation of an ageing population with fewer children, the current policy might not lead to the resolution of the most serious issues of the nation from a long-term viewpoint. Therefore, more fundamental and theoretical discussions on this issue, from wider perspectives, will be required, inviting all kinds of stakeholders both from inside and outside the nation.

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