

A Moral Education Study

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Religion and science are the two wings upon which man's intelligence can soar into the heights, with which the human soul can progress. It is not possible to fly with one wing alone! Should a man try to fly with the wing of religion alone he would quickly fall into the quagmire of superstition, whilst on the other hand, with the wing of science alone he would also make no progress, but fall into the despairing slough of materialism. (1)

As a result of the application of scientific research in the 20th century, most people in industrialized countries are leading longer and healthier lives. In the field of public health, assessment instruments were created to evaluate the health and development of infants and children so that any sign of ill health could be dealt with before long-term problems could occur. Vaccines were created to inoculate children against deadly diseases. As a result we have extended life expectancy, increased powers of intelligence and physical well-being. But in the field of moral development, no such unified assessment instruments have been created even though our research on the issue is just as compelling as research on health. For example, it was recently reported that the statistical relationship between watching television violence and carrying out violent behavior is stronger than the studies that relate the lack of calcium to brittle bones. (2) We are very sure that a child should drink milk or take in adequate amounts of calcium in order to insure strong bones. But we do not watch the mental and spiritual diet of children nearly enough.

On the question of what promotes "prosocial behavior" - that is positive behavior which is helpful to others, which avoids "antisocial acts" in children, a surprising amount of social research data exists. I reasoned that if some of the keys to strong moral functioning could be worked into an assessment instrument, we might be able to do the same thing for the moral health field as health professionals have done for public health -

that is, to identify the elements of positive development and to head off the negative influences before they become critical problems.

Some of the factors that solid scientific research has shown lead to positive or “prosocial behavior” are good family relationships, good peer relationships, a strong and accurate sense of ones own effectiveness (called self-esteem), positive socialization through balanced methods of discipline that are consultative or “inductive” rather than “authoritarian”, and direct instruction that uses stories and role models in the educational process. (3, 4, 5)

Beginning with these indicators, an assessment instrument was created and tested out with junior high school students in two public schools here in Yamaguchi, Japan and two in Anhui, China in 1998. (6) The results were compared in other reports. (6, 7). But for the sake of this talk, I will speak only of the results with Japanese youth. The findings seem to indicate that in a number of areas, the Japanese middle school students I studied are morally disempowered by various elements in their environment and their own way of thinking. To summarize the major points found:

1. Many Japanese students by their own reports are isolated socially:
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 - 31-39% rarely or never talk to their mothers,
 - 53-58% rarely or never talk to their fathers,
 - Over 50% do not talk to other adults at all,
 - Over 50% do not talk to siblings or cousins about things of importance to them,
 - 60% do not talk with other youth about things of importance to them,
 - 25% do not talk even with their friends about things of importance to them.

2. Many Japanese students lack a positive view or confidence in their own abilities and capacities. Particularly of concern is that

- 25% do not have a strong sense of their ability to discern right from wrong.
- 53% do not feel confident that things will continue to go well even when things go right for them.
- 29% say that they are not happy to continue to try, even when things go well for them.
- 37% do not feel happy or able even when things go well.

3. Regarding qualities they admire and role models they choose, and their own view of themselves as people who are honest, helpful or caring, Japanese students express a surprising tendency toward asocial and in some degree antisocial rather than prosocial attitudes:

For example, although hard work and perseverance are often mentioned as qualities supremely “Japanese,” only 64% of Japanese students agreed that they admire people who are persevering, and only 38% said they admire hard working people. One quarter of the students stated they do not admire hard working people, and one third expressed no opinion.

-Although honesty and truthfulness are foundations of social and moral development, only 65% of the Japanese middle school students surveyed agreed that honesty was an admirable quality. One tenth expressed that they do not admire honest people. Only 26% consider themselves truthful, while 15% do not consider themselves at all honest.

-Although kindness and getting along were listed by the students as the most admired qualities, only about one in four (26%) of the students consider themselves to be caring, 27% considered themselves people who do good, while 13% do not consider themselves caring and 15% do not consider themselves people who do good. Nearly one in three (32%) of the Japanese students say they rarely or never help others.

Taking the results of the survey overall, although there are indications for the Japanese that teachers care about students and have an adequate grasp of teaching methods, and although discipline styles seem to be less authoritarian than in the past, allowing for more student input, the problem seems to be in the lack of focus on moral qualities and

issues within the students' lives. Students are not getting enough time or encouragement to develop their prosocial capacities in family and social relationships. They have a weak sense of their own cognitive and emotional capacities because the focus of the curriculum seems to be on the "tools" of reading, writing, history, math and science, rather than on the "construction" or "development" of better, more trustworthy, caring and able human beings. More time needs to be given to human relationships and human value both in school and outside of school. (7)

I shared these findings with a number of educators including one American Coordinator for International Relations in a nearby city. The findings bothered him enough to wonder if Japanese youth who are involved in a religious community might get different results. He had been visiting and studying about the Airaku Kyoukai group from the Konkoukyou religion, and he was eager to introduce me to them. This was the beginning of what is becoming a relationship of great mutual appreciation between the Airaku Group and the Bahai Community.

In order to let you have the most direct understanding of how the Airaku Community works with their young people, I will share the points made by one of their group leaders, Mr. Otsubo Mitsuaki, who came to the ABS meeting to give a short explanation about their group, and their educational philosophies and practices. Two important themes seem to characterize Airaku philosophy and the prevailing attitude in the community. One is the belief that all troubles in life come from God for our benefit, to help train our souls. Therefore the proper attitude in the face of difficulties is thankfulness for the chance to improve our spiritual capacities. The other is "yukinari" - the belief that many coincidences and changes of plan may also be "messages" from heaven to guide us to what God wants us to do. In any case, being actively engaged in behavior that is pleasing to God at all times, is a sure way to find happiness under all conditions. The condition of prayer is one which puts us in direct touch with the guiding Spirit of our Creator and therefore regular practice of prayer is the happiest and most essential of all conditions. Mr. Otsubo emphasized that they do very little direct teaching with the young people. They do not carry out a systematic curriculum of formal classes imparting

their doctrine. But the young people are an integral part of their community life. They are invited to (and often do) take part in the early morning prayer sessions which begin at 5:00 AM each day. Community festivals and gatherings are held quite frequently draw believers and friends from other localities as well and the youth are often active helpers in these events. As the youth participate and in other ways serve the community, they gain direct experience with a life of prayerfulness, service and harmony with others. About 100 people (mostly family groups) live in the Airaku facility. Children of the residents attend local schools, but spend their afternoons and evenings at the Airaku facility. Families live at the facility for various lengths of time, mostly in order for the adult members to have a place to learn deeply about the Airaku teachings and way of life. There is a brass band that is organized for many of the youth to participate in. Through this band, they learn music and find a joyful activity that encourages excellence and self-expression.

Some may find it unusual that members of two religious groups such as Bahá'í and Airaku should be enjoying such an open and positive interactive encounter. However, in the Bahá'í view this is EXACTLY how religions should regard and treat each other. Our Writings say:

The strife between religions, nations and races arises from misunderstanding. If we investigate the religions to discover the principles underlying their foundations we will find they agree, for the fundamental reality of them is one and not multiple. By this means the religionists of the world will reach their point of unity and reconciliation. They will ascertain the truth that the purpose of religion is the acquisition of praiseworthy virtues, betterment of morals, spiritual development of mankind, the real life and divine bestowals. All the prophets have been the promoters of these principles; none of them has been the promoter of corruption, vice or evil. They have summoned mankind to all good.” (8)

Result of the Airaku Survey

To begin with, surveys of the attitudes and methods of the five Airaku teachers was compared with data on the regular Japanese junior high school teachers surveyed in the earlier study. Teachers in Japan are generally conscientious about their teaching roles. I would like to point out that the teachers who work with the Airaku youth are not professional teachers, and they seem to be less certain about the role of the teacher than the regular teachers working in the school system. The Airaku teachers are not as concerned about discipline (but perhaps that is natural in the informal environment they teach in with fewer students). Still, they do assign more importance to praising good behavior and less importance to scolding than do regular teachers. Airaku teachers give greater importance to adjusting their lessons to the level of their students, to using cooperative teaching methods and to creating an atmosphere of spiritual development. It is not surprising that Airaku teachers think it much more important to present role models from religious history and literature than regular teachers do. From the Airaku teachers' reports it seems their students have a higher degree of family encouragement, more supportive friendships and are much more involved in religious and moral development activities than the average Japanese students. Other than that they showed no differences in terms of school or extracurricular activities.

The behavior problem scores that Airaku teachers indicated for their students were far lower than the average of other students on thirteen critical behavior problem items including violence, abuse, dishonesty, stealing, gambling and the like. In less critical areas such as daydreaming, forgetfulness, talkativeness, and unreliability, Airaku students were about equal to regular Japanese students. In terms of positive qualities noted by their teachers, Airaku students were higher than even the high-average regular students in the areas of kindness (benevolence) and reverence.

In terms of the students own view of themselves. it was interesting that Airaku students were not quite as confident as regular students on

some items. Regarding whether they feel they can discern right from wrong, or have patience or the ability to improve, they scored about the same as other Japanese students. But in one area they outscored both high and low functioning students: that is, the Airaku students consider themselves quite happy.

Airaku students have a higher number of people they can and do turn to for help, or guidance than regular students. (that is, an average of 3, compared to the regular average of 2.5) Although 25% of this group said they had no one they talked to regularly (not different from the regular students), a nearly equal number said they regularly talk to 4 or more people (a much higher percentage by comparison to regular students). The Airaku teachers pointed out that their group is a mixture of long-term members and new members. This may be one reason why statistically they don't show a greater difference in this and other areas of social support. On average, however, Airaku students do have a higher degree of admiration for kind and honest role models and show greater admiration for people who are leaders and people who act as role models than regular students do.

Airaku youth seem to be bothered a bit less by trouble or difficulties. They feel more confident that troubles are short term, and that things will continue to go well once they are experiencing success. Most Japanese students in the earlier study do not express this confidence.

Although Airaku is a religious group whose teachings are based on a belief in Divine Providence which strengthens people through various tests and trials of life, I was surprised to note that the Airkau youth expressed no more confidence that their average peers than their happiness may depend on pleasing a Divine Creator. They expressed somewhat less confidence that avoiding evil or selfish desires were important for their happiness. In general they seemed less certain about the sources of their own happiness than the average. This surprised me.

It may be that the youth are not yet embracing independently the "message" of their mentors in terms of their faith, however, the social milieu provided for them enables them to feel a greater sense of happiness

and with a greater level of social support from family and mentors, greater attention to virtues and role models, and in turn, they show a significantly lower number of behavior problems than even the high-functioning Japanese youth in general school situations. The “medium” of the religious community is having a positive effect.

I believe that the Airaku Kyoukai, the Baha'is and other religious communities should be confident and active in providing opportunities for young people to be in contact with people who nurture them spiritually as well as in body and mind. As Abdu'l-Baha has noted,

“For, unless the moral character of a nation is educated, as well as its brain and its talents, civilization has no sure basis. As religion inculcates morality, it is therefore the truest philosophy, and on it is built the only lasting civilization.” PT 31.

Let us not fail in our moral duty to our youth to provide them the means to grow in moral strength and happiness. Thank you so much to our friends at the Airaku Kyoukai for sharing their views and experiences with us.

References

- (1) Abdu'l-Baha, *Paris Talks*, p. 143.
- (2) See *APA Online: Violence on Television*.
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- (3) Damon, William (1988) *The Moral Child*, New York: The Free Press.
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- (6) Higgins, Marilyn, *Assessment of Environments for Moral Education*, Doctoral Dissertation, Hilo, Hawaii: Greenwich University, 1999.
- (7) Higgins, Marilyn "Comparing Elements of Moral Development in Japanese and Chinese Middle Schools" *Bulletin of the Faculty of International Studies*, Yamaguchi Prefectural University, No. 6, March 2000, pp. 49-66.
- (8) Abdu'l-Baha, *Foundations of World Unity*, p. 15.
- (9) Abdu'l-Baha, *Paris Talks*, p. 31.