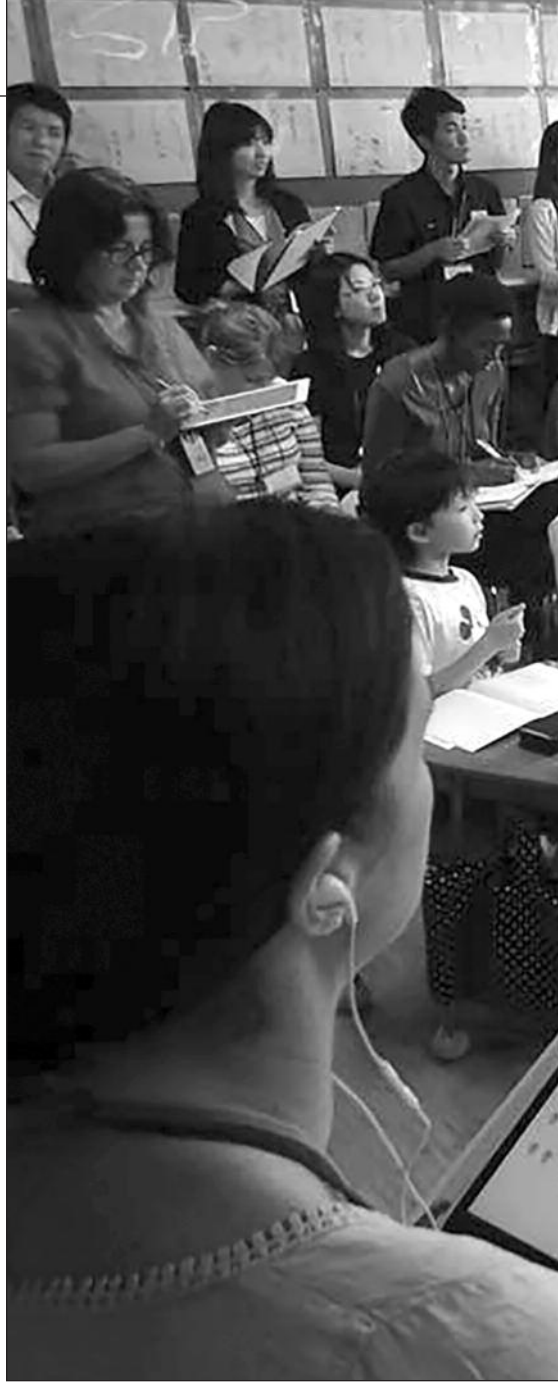
BOWING TO A DIFFERENT CULTURE

BY CORNELIUS N. GROVE



"'Culture of teaching' means that there is a collection of expectations, norms, and values about what teachers do that is shared by educational authorities, school administrators, parents and other community members, the teachers themselves—and even the children."

IMAGINE THIS: In an elementary school, four first- and second-grade teachers decide to improve the way a subtraction lesson is taught to first-graders. Over a three-week period, and joined by a vice principal, they meet numerous times in working sessions lasting one to two hours. They develop a 12-page lesson plan as well as intensively deliberated handouts and manipulatives, and debate the best arrangement of information on the blackboard. Then they revise all of this into a 13-page version, which is pilot-tested with one participant's first-grade class while the other four observe and take notes. Another revision follows, then a second pilot session with another class—which was observed by every teacher in the school. Final revisions occur, resulting in a 15-page plan. The closing activity is a two-hour all-faculty meeting during which the fine points of this improved lesson are discussed.

Does that sound like a realistic American scenario? Of course not. This occurred at Tsuta Elementary School, a public school near Hiroshima, Japan. There, lesson-improvement practices such as this are common and are known as *Jugyo Kenkyu* or Lesson Study. Similar efforts are common throughout Japan; in China and Taiwan, the same process often is referred to as "Research Lesson."

For Tsuta Elementary's teachers willingly to persist through the time- and energy-consuming Lesson Study process, they need certain qualities: expertise in the fine points of mathematical reasoning informed their quest to help their pupils readily grasp subtraction; collegiality and professionalism supplied their resolve to join colleagues in making continuous improvements to their craft.

They also need an external environment that supports Lesson Study. At Tsuta Elementary and throughout Japan, detailed multipage lesson plans are the norm, and the teaching of pilot lessons that colleagues observe and later critique is common. On most school days, teachers have two to three hours with no classroom responsibilities—and every school has space set aside for teachers where they can collaborate in pairs or small groups.

In other words, Tsuta Elementary School is immersed in a culture of teaching unlike that prevailing across the U.S. "Culture of teaching" means that there is a collection of expectations, norms, and values about what teachers do that is shared by educational authorities, school administrators, parents and other community members, the teachers themselves—and even the children.

The following four analogies will help better explain the East Asian culture of teaching:

Analogy of the virtuoso performer. One anthropologist in East Asia found that, to capture what she had come to appreciate about the primary school teachers she was observing, she needed to compare them with virtuoso performers.

The class becomes an audience. Involved is much of the dynamic of actor, stage, and audience. The excellent teacher is one who performs for the class as a whole and is able to reach the entire group. The virtuoso impresses and affects the audience. The virtuoso certainly interprets and responds to the feel of the audience, yet the chief activity—teaching—does not alter for individual members in the auditorium.

An East Asian teacher put it this way: "Teaching has a sweet flavor. The good teacher, like the virtuoso musician, is more than an exceptionally competent machine;

there is an affective requirement, the need for heart, for appreciation of the 'sweet flavor.' "

Analogy of the academic specialist. The notion of a virtuoso performance by any professional implies that he or she has thoroughly mastered his or her craft or field. In East Asia, classroom teachers are expected to have mastered their field, to be academic specialists. A Chinese proverb notes that, "To give a student a cup of water, the teacher should have a bucket of water."

Having worked tirelessly to become an authority in his or her field, an academic master is well equipped to guide novice learners. In East Asia, such guidance includes direct, unsparing critiques of the learner's bumbling attempts, which are considered neither by learners nor masters to undermine self-esteem. Pride in accomplishment is one's reward for mastery after intense study.

An important goal for teachers is to present the lesson content so that all their pupils will be able to benefit. Yes, this means that the teacher might progress a little slower than the most-able children could keep up with, and a little faster than the least-able ones can grasp without extra effort. That is okay, though, because a key objective is for all pupils to progress together, as East Asian educators believe that the primary years are not a time to highlight children's differences. The teacher is well equipped to make these judgments and to assist patiently individuals who are struggling—but not while the lesson is in progress.

Teacher-as-academic-specialist is not merely a well-meaning platitude. Teachers in East Asia possess, on average, stronger content knowledge than their U.S. counterparts. One discouraging comparison was reported by a researcher who interviewed elementary math teachers in China and the U.S. The Chinese teachers came from both rural and urban schools; all were graduates of the ninth grade and of teacher training schools. The Americans all had bachelor's degrees; some had master's degrees.

The interviews comprised four questions that probed how each teacher would handle a mathematical concept. The questions increased in difficulty, with the fourth involving complex concepts. The Chinese teachers handled all questions well and some offered multiple solutions. The Americans' responses "revealed disturbing deficiencies."

The researcher then asked the same four questions of ninth-graders "at an unremarkable school in Shanghai." She reported that "these Chinese ninth-grade students demonstrated better understanding of the interview problems than did the American teachers."

Analogy of the pastor. Many Protestant churches refer to their ministers as "pastors," a term that sidesteps their role as religious lead-

ers and emphasizes their role as benevolent guardians of the moral, physical, and emotional well-being of those under their care.

Similarly, an expected role of a teacher in East Asia is that of a moral guide and mentor, one who not only advises protégés regarding ethical behavior, but models an exemplary life. Chinese university students, asked about a good teacher's qualities, replied that he or she should "have great virtue"; "be a good model for every student"; and "help me learn more of the world and life so that I can deal with others more successfully."

In addition, a pattern found among the cultures of East Asia is an expectation that teachers have significant responsibility for their pupils' behavior outside the classroom—and even off the school grounds. In fact, if a Japanese child gets up to mischief in the community, witnesses often report it to the school instead of to the child's parents.

Outside-the-classroom guidance extends all the way to how pupils will spend their vacation days. Pre-vacation plans include times of day to arise, study, practice a sport, and retire. The teacher assists the child in devising a goal-driven schedule: swim 100 meters; upgrade math skills; stop fighting with brother.

The pastor analogy, together with that of the academic specialist, is an element in an archetypal East Asian relationship pattern known as "senior-junior." In virtually all relationships, both parties are conscious of who is "senior" and who is "junior." Examples include parent-child and older sibling-younger sibling. The ideal is not for the senior to boss around the junior—quite the opposite. Without waiting to be asked, seniors caringly mentor and advise their juniors regarding their skills, attitudes, values, behavior, relationships, and overall personal development.

Analogy of the athletic coach. Those who base their views of teachers in East Asia solely on observations of secondary or university classrooms often brand the teachers as formal and distant. What they do not observe, or only fleetingly observe, are teacher-student interactions outside the classroom.

When lessons are not in progress, the expectation in East Asia is for teacher-student relationships of two types: pastor-parishioner and coach-athlete.

A teacher resembles a coach in that the coach has a warm and largely informal relationship with the athlete, one that often encompasses nonsport aspects of the athlete's life; maintains high expectations for the athlete's performance; instructs the athlete what to do (*e.g.*, practice drills) and how to do it (*e.g.*, techniques) in pursuit of consistently high performance; models and trains the athlete in basic skills and winning techniques; advises the athlete about ways of supporting continuous performance improvement (*e.g.*, get more sleep, eat a well-balanced diet); disciplines the athlete who fails to follow his or her instructions; directly criticizes the athlete for poor techniques or insufficient effort, showing little or no concern for the athlete's self-esteem; and regards the athlete's success or failure as his or her own.

Most teachers in East Asia feel positively in-

CENTERING THE LESSON

What is the meaning of "student-centered" or "child-centered"? Diane Ravitch's *EdSpeak: A Glossary of Education Terms, Phrases, Buzzwords, and Jargon* explains those terms this way: Classroom activities are "determined by the interests, characteristics, and needs of the students."

In the U.S., many educators and parents sing the praises of child-centered learning. They have in mind classrooms where teachers do their best to create a learning environment that resonates with each child's unique characteristics.

What does "teacher-centered" mean? *EdSpeak* says that it designates "a classroom in which the teacher is in charge and makes all the important decisions; also known as the teacher-dominated classroom." Note that, for Americans, "to dominate" is not an admirable activity.

It is quite revealing that U.S. educators and parents put so much emotional intensity into the issue of whether a classroom is "centered" on the teacher or the students. Most people in East Asia do not worry about this issue.

Why do we here in the U.S. care so much about this "centered" business? It is a predictable feature of a culture that has become more and more individualistic since the latter decades of the 19th century. Youngsters learn to enact the behavior and values of individualism first by being with family members, then by attending the early grades in school, and later by other means.

Americans consciously care that each child develops self-acceptance, -confidence, -reliance, -expressiveness, and -assertiveness, as well as creativity and proud appreciation of his or her own unique qualities and abilities. We believe that a classroom that consistently is centered on the teacher simply will not do.

Sure, parents agree that adults should wield ultimate authority within schools, but those adults had better not run classrooms in ways that undermine attention to individual children's unique characteristics, special needs, preferred learning styles, and emerging creativity.

Many Americans agree that gaining knowledge is an important reason why children attend school. The knowledge they expect children to learn includes reading, writing, mathematics, and a variety of academic and other subjects, all of which are delivered to children via "lessons." So, let us narrow our attention to the characteristics of the lessons being taught in primary school classrooms.

The three indispensable components of a lesson are teacher, students, and knowledge to be learned. Let us ponder the implications of each when it is where a lesson is "centered."

Implications of a teacher-centered lesson. My belief always has been that, if a lesson is unmistakably teacher-centered, what is going on in the room is more about the teacher's self-aggrandizement than about anything related to the students.

My assumption about a teacher-centered (or -dominated) lesson is that the instructor would behave in an emotionally distant, controlling manner, and would show little sustained interest in pupils' learning the material (individually or as a group), or in their possible contributions to the lesson. Similarly, there would be little sustained interest in the children's quality of relationships with one another; their overall social development, in their families' situations, or their personal interests, needs, ideas, creative potential, and so forth.

I am now recalling my high school teacher of geometry and calculus, Ms. Betty Bates, who some would say was delivering teacher-centered lessons. Others would say she was "old-school." I would say that she cared deeply about our learning geometry and calculus, and learning it well. In my memory of school days, she reigns as the best classroom teacher I ever had. She does not fit the narrow definition of teacher-centered that I have just employed.

My view is that teacher-centeredness of the self-aggrandizing variety is a perversion of the meaning, purpose, and promise of education. Moreover, I am convinced that that variety of teacher-centeredness is rare in both the U.S. and East Asia.

Implications of a student-centered lesson. If a lesson unmistakably is student-centered, what is going on in the room primarily is about matters such as the students' needs, interests, ideas, creativity, learning capacities, and challenges in understanding the material, insofar as these are known by the teacher.

If a lesson were centered on the students, the teacher's choices—which topics to emphasize; what methods and materials to use; how to motivate the students to learn; how to actively engage

clined to exercise near-parental nurturing, directiveness, and protection toward the youth for whom they are responsible. For one thing, the tradition of "senior-junior" relationships runs deep. For another, the teachers themselves had been "juniors" for at least the first 20 years of their lives. We can imagine that, looking back, many feel deep gratitude toward the "seniors" who mentored them with mind and heart.

In the U.S., the egalitarian values of our highly individualist culture lead us to attenuate any authority that we have over others, and to try to minimize others' authority over ourselves. It is not that we deny the legitimacy of authority, but that we are uncomfortable giving and receiving it. Teachers hesitate to assume the role of content expert, portraying themselves instead as fellow learners. They assume that their exercising of authority might damage students' self-esteem, stifle their creativity, or detract from classroom engagement and enjoyment.

Across East Asia, a teacher with such attitudes is regarded with skepticism, or worse. For example, one author has written of her time teaching English to Chinese teachers from rural schools. She and other American teachers were steeped in progressive methods. They portrayed themselves as "well-read colleagues," strove to bring music and fun into their lessons, and refused to correct students' errors in spoken English to "maintain the integrity of their relationships with their (adult) students." However, not correcting students' errors turned out to be interpreted by their students as either lazy or a clear indication that a foreign teacher is not well-trained or experienced.

A teacher is perceived as the ultimate authority on the standard of correctness and, as such, must wield his or her power. This seems to resonate with the course evaluations submitted by the students, who had tremendous praise for teachers who constantly corrected them and worked exclusively for oral language mastery.

Because American teachers tend to feel uncomfortable with strongly exercising a "senior" role, they forfeit receiving deep respect from their students. They often substitute a need to be liked, which they encourage by behaving in a friendly, egalitarian manner. Affection often is positive in human relations, but a need to be liked can undermine a teacher's determination to exercise a mentoring role that would have long-term benefits for the pupils. For teachers in East Asia, responsibly exercising their "senior" role is what is important. Being respected is desirable; being liked is not a concern. ★

***Cornelius N. Grove**—managing partner of the global business consultancy, Grovewell LLC, Brooklyn, N.Y.—is coauthor of* Encountering the Chinese: A Modern Country, An Ancient Culture*, and author of* The Aptitude Myth: How an Ancient Belief Came to Undermine Children's Learning Today*;* The Drive to Learn: What the East Asian Experience Tells Us About Raising Students Who Excel*; and, most recently,* A Mirror for Americans: What the East Asian Experience Tells Us About Teaching Students Who Excel*, from which this article is adapted.*

them; where to focus time and attention during the lesson; and to what extent to respond to individual students' needs, questions, and ideas—all would be guided largely by the teacher's beliefs about what is the best outcome for the individual students.

This is where things become complicated. Assumptions about what is the best outcome for students vary widely. "Best outcome" could be about their well-being now, when they apply for college or specialized high school, or after they are adults. Teachers at a school with religious sponsorship might make student-centered choices that contrast sharply with those made by teachers at a progressive school or a school in an authoritarian society. Dozens of factors easily could become involved.

There also is the factor of national culture. A key distinction between educators in the U.S. and East Asia is that we think of students as separate and distinct individuals, while East Asians think of students as groups of similar individuals. Their view is epitomized by this quote from a Japanese educator: "The goal of education is the reduction of individual differences among children." That individual would not last a week in a U.S. school.

I cannot think of "student-centered" in the American context without being reminded of 19th-century philosopher Herbert Spencer. More than any other individual, Spencer is responsible for Americans' beliefs about how children learn best, thanks to his popular public lectures and his massively influential little book entitled *Education*.

Referring to what children learn in school as a "plan of culture," Spencer offers seven guiding principles for ensuring that children learn. Here is the seventh: "As a final test by which to judge any plan of culture comes this question: Does it create a pleasurable excitement in the pupils? When in doubt whether a particular mode or arrangement is or is not in harmony with the foregoing seven principles, we may safely abide by this criterion."

A few pages earlier, Spencer warmly had approved of "efforts to make early education amusing" and added that "daily we more and more conform our plans to juvenile opinion."

Implications of a knowledge-centered lesson. If a lesson unmistakably is knowledge-centered, then what is going on in the room fundamentally is driven by the goal of enabling the students to master the material being taught.

It is essential to keep one thing in mind about a knowledge-centered lesson: We are talking about what is going on during the lesson. That leaves open the possibility that a teacher, at other times in the classroom, and at other places in or even beyond the school, might demonstrate sustained concern and support for the students' well-being as a social group, as separate and distinct individuals, or even as something akin to family members.

Lessons, however, are devoted 100% to students' learning the material. Ms. Bates' geometry and calculus lessons were devoted to my, and my classmates', learning the material.

Teachers in East Asia devote vast volumes of thought, time, and effort into caring for the well-being and social development of their students. It is just that when a lesson is being taught is not the time to attend to those matters.

The internal logic of the content East Asians are teaching is the principal driver of how they organize their lessons. They pay little or no attention to factors such as each pupil's personality, interests, creativity, need to be motivated, antipathy to homework, or "learning style." Given most Americans' definition of student-centered, if a teacher is not paying attention to those latter factors, then the lesson falls short of excellence.

The methods used to deliver lessons to pupils in East Asia often are branded as teacher-centered. A far more-accurate generalization is that the lessons are directively facilitated or directively coordinated by the teacher in such a way that the pupils as a whole class—and not just those who raise their hands—frequently are contributing in substantive, on-topic ways.

East Asian lessons also are often branded as not student-centered. If we use our American meaning of student-centered, that claim seems to have merit but, as we have seen, there is an alternative definition of what student-centered means—one that focuses on the whole class, draws on the teacher's awareness of how its members tend to think, and envisions delivering content in ways that require broad participation and advance all pupils' abilities.

My years of study of the voluminous research findings have brought me to the conclusion that the most-accurate generalization about East Asian lessons is that they are knowledge-centered because, to an extent rarely seen here in the U.S., East Asian pupils and their teacher are united in their attention to the knowledge to be learned, with the pupils' attention to the knowledge being actively steered by the teacher.

The mirror of East Asian schooling alerts us to the fact that the terms "knowledge-centered lesson" and "knowledge-centered classroom" mean different things. Lessons in East Asia persistently are knowledge-centered. Classrooms in East Asia are not.

How shall we characterize East Asian primary school classrooms? Over decades, researchers have reported that teachers strive to develop a warm and supportive relationship with each child, one that encompasses the whole child, *i.e.*, that is not skewed toward cognitive growth. Teachers devote an abundance of time and energy to a variety of supportive activities for their pupils' all-around development as human beings who identify with their groups and feel responsible for their well-being.

However, when a lesson begins, all that is set aside. Its objectives, plan, methods, and delivery are marshaled by the teacher in a variety of ways that persistently involve all pupils in mentally grappling with the knowledge to be learned.

In my view, the knowledge-centered character of primary school lessons in East Asia is the single most important factor that gives children there a competitive academic edge and helps to account for their superior performance on international comparative tests.