25 Olympic education

How Tokyo 2020 shapes body and mind in Japan

Wolfram Manzenreiter

Welcome volunteers

“Rie, you’re late!” The nine-year old girl rushes past her friends waiting at the entrance to their classroom. It is shortly past 8:00. This week it is the turn of the fourth graders at Higurashi Elementary School to participate in the “Salutation Group” (*aisatsu shi-tai*). Since classes start only at 8:30, participation in this extracurricular activity is voluntary – nonetheless the entire class registered. Led by their classroom teacher, the children march out of the school building at 8:14 and line up along the road on the left side of the main entrance (see Figure 25.1). Another class has already taken position on the right side, with the principal and more teachers standing in the back. From now on until the school gate is closed at 8:30, the children and teachers formally greet every child coming to school and passers-by on their way to work, calling “*ohayō gozaimasu*,” followed by a deep bow. For the next ten minutes, there’s a constant up and down of children’s heads, and the downtown neighborhood alley echoes with the children’s voices.

“This is part of our Olympic Education Program,” explains the principal. “Children learn about the protocol of politeness which essentially is part of a Japanese sense of hospitality (*omotenashi*). In addition, we want to make them aware of being part of the community, and how important greetings and awareness are for social relations. By having the entire school participate, our pupils develop a sense of belonging.” “Not just to the school,” adds Rie’s classroom teacher, “but also to the community. And that everybody can contribute to it, by for example keeping the neighborhood clean. Once a month we call our students to volunteer for the Clean-up Group (*osōji shi-tai*) tidying up the shrubbery and walkways around nearby Nippori Station.” Like most of her classmates, Rie is not particularly excited about garbage collecting. “I liked the warm feelings aunts on the road gave me in return for my respectful greeting.” Her

Figure 25.1 Advertising the Olympics at the entrance of a Tokyo elementary school, 2018.

Source: © Barbara Holthus.

friend adds, “It’s nice to see how my tree gets prettier with every opening flower.” “Volunteer flowers” (*borantia no hana*) is an adaptation of a device widely used in primary school education. “For every contribution they make as volunteers, children receive a flower mark to be attached to a tree on their poster. By having the tree gradually fill with flowers, they develop aspirations and a sense of dedication. It enables them to observe their progress and finally a proof of accomplishment,” comments the classroom teacher.

This semi-fictional vignette draws on official reports documenting the curricular tie-ins between the upcoming Olympics and Japanese school education in the lead up to Tokyo 2020.¹ Weaving together typical school values of cleanliness and social responsibility with Olympic themes of volunteerism, achievement orientation, and diversity, as outlined in the Tokyo 2020 Games Foundation Plan, educational programs like these represent ways that Japanese officials envision linking the 2020 Olympics with the shaping of its own future citizens.

Olympic education

While for most the Olympic Games are simply the world's largest sport tournament, the IOC has always preferred to highlight its founder's idealist vision of the Games in the service of humankind to promote a peaceful world and the preservation of human dignity. Pierre de Coubertin's ideas about Olympism as a "philosophy of life" were enshrined in the Olympic Charter in the 1930s, stating that "blending sport with culture and education, Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy of effort, the educational value of good example, social responsibility and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles." Making sure that this does not go unnoticed is the responsibility of the Olympic Education Commission. Prior to its installment in 1967, the IOC simply encouraged national Olympic committee members to educate youth about the Olympic spirit. Retired architecture professor Watanabe Kenichi remembers the textbook *The Olympics and school* that was widely used among elementary and junior high schools upon the occasion of the 1964 Tokyo Summer Olympics. However, he falls short of remembering the core principles of Olympism addressed in the textbook, including international goodwill, mutual respect, pride in being Japanese, knowledge about the Olympics, and a proactive attitude towards participation in sports. Fast forward to the present, in which coeval Olympics Minister Sakurada Yoshitaka, whose periodic gaffes enforced his removal in April 2019, confessed in a diet session to neither being aware of the Olympic ideals in detail or having read the Olympic Charter.

Sakurada's ignorance is remarkable given that the IOC nowadays is taking a tougher stance on message control. Ever since corruption, bribery, doping, hyper-commercialization of sports, and the excessive costs explosion of host cities have stained its public face, education and the immaterial values of the Olympics have become a core element of its public relations affairs. Part of the IOC reform Agenda 2020 is the requirement by host candidate cities to outline "educational programmes for the promotion of a healthy lifestyle as well as the Olympic values both in the years leading up to and during the Games." Another outcome is the Olympic Values Education Programme, a resource toolkit packed with ideas, stories, and activities to be used in and outside of classrooms at all levels from elementary to senior high school. Since 2007 it is available in the public domain for free and most of its content has also been translated into Japanese.² However, teachers and scholars in Japan found it difficult to use and the teaching of universal principles simply not fitting with national curricula and Japanese customs. Stakeholders such as the Tokyo Metropolitan Government or the Japan Sports Agency at the Ministry of

Education therefore put great effort into developing their own Olympic teaching resources, organizing workshops for teachers, sponsoring the exchange of schools with Olympians and Paralympians, and monitoring the adaptation of Olympic education at the school level.

The official objectives in Japan echo the IOC's current interest as much as the goals from 1964: (1) to promote the significance and history of sport, the Olympics, and the Paralympics; (2) to train volunteers who embody Japan's spirit of "hospitality"; (3) to raise awareness about the notion of an "inclusive society" through sport; (4) to cultivate the public awareness of Japanese culture and to promote intercultural understanding and diversity; and (5) to promote interest and enjoyment of sport. Within Tokyo, and some of its neighboring municipalities that co-host Olympic events, all grades from elementary through high school are expected to devote a minimum of 35 hours per year to realizing these objectives, not just in physical education, but also in political education, history, moral studies, geography, or language classes. In Tokyo alone, about 3,500 schools with 1.5 million students between the ages of 3 to 18 are exposed to Olympic education – until 2020. What comes then is another issue.

Outside the host area, schools are reluctant to subscribe to the promotion of Olympic ideals. Usually, Olympic education is mandatory only at third-year junior high school, where it is briefly mentioned in the national curriculum for physical education. As school education is under the jurisdiction of prefectural educational boards, the central government lacks the power to enforce Olympic education – unless local educational boards are willing to bow down to requests by the Ministry of Education and the Tokyo Organising Committee of the Olympic Games (TOCOG). But TOCOG has found a way to circumnavigate such barriers. Its "Yoi don! School" initiative is targeting all schools and students across Japan. Schools are invited to register directly and participate in the educational program. The meaning of "Yoi Don!" in English is "get set, go!" Get set, go!-schools thus demonstrate their willingness to embrace the Olympic mission, either by having students draw posters, vote for the mascots, adopt teaching material, or imitate the Olympic ceremonial backdrop during their school festivals. As of summer 2019, one out of every three schools across Japan has been recruited. Critical opinions come from teachers mostly, sometimes from parents. Common complaints are about the additional workload with more content crammed into already tightly-packed syllabi.

Outcome of Olympic education programs

Olympic education itself is unlikely to change attitudes towards social participation, voluntary work, or social inclusiveness unless the host

government is willing to engage a range of relevant stakeholders and coordinate efforts between different government agencies in a long-term strategy. The same holds true for the IOC's claim concerning increased sport participation as a legacy. Sport participation rates in Japan have been notoriously low in comparison to other advanced industrialized societies. Growth rates over the past two decades were mainly achieved thanks to the increased involvement of the elderly. In fact, no other age cohort has higher participation rates than the 70–79-year-olds. About 70% of them are actively engaged in sports once a week. Adults aged 30–59 are below the national average: about 30% do not participate in any sports activity throughout the year. They feel constrained by tight job schedules and demanding household chores, and probably by lack of opportunities. Past initiatives to promote grassroots sports hence attempted to change behavioral patterns by addressing the scarcity of sports facilities or sports clubs, albeit with limited success. More adults are using their home, nearby parks, or public spaces rather than joining a sports club or visiting a gym. Particularly troubling is the low interest among female teens. Statistics indicate that not doing sports at a young age translates into shunning sports at later stages of life as well.

Stakes are high for the Japanese government that places its hopes on sports and physical activity as a strategy to prevent spending on health and long-term care from spiraling out of control. An active lifestyle not only prolongs the period of vitality and autonomy by eight years on average. It also helps reduce per capita spending. National health expenditures have been climbing in Japan's super-aging society year-by-year, reaching \$422 billion, or nearly 8% of gross national income, in 2017. The target of 65% somewhat physically active Japanese by 2022 involves the (re)activation of 20 million people. The Sasakawa Sports Foundation strongly recommends tax incentives and direct investments to achieve such a goal: investments of \$400 million are estimated to trigger a reduction of health expenditures by \$32 billion.³

In recent years, the government demonstrated its capability of shifting priorities and taking a more proactive stance in sports promotion. The establishment of the Japan Sports Agency has been a seminal part of a larger sports policy reform initiated by former Olympics Minister Sakurada during his term as Vice Minister of Education in 2006. Back then, the former rugby player commissioned a report to shape Japan's national sport policy for the 21st century. The “Strategy of a State Founded on Sports” (*supōtsu rikkoku senryaku*) defined sports as a primary policy field of national politics and a soft-power tool to gain status and prestige in accordance with Japan's international importance. It stipulated the responsibility of the government to foster sports by revising the decade-old Basic Sports

Law, to pool political power into a single state agency, and to bid for major sports events. Having promised to expand spending on sports in the case of getting the Games, Japan's sports budget has seen a rise from \$235 million in 2012 to \$350 million in 2019. However, most of the rise is dedicated to the training of top athletes (\$96 million) and the preparation for the Olympics. Expenditure for grassroots sports, including infrastructure measures, lifelong sports and child fitness, is stagnating at a much lower level (\$35 million). Olympic education and its ideals of international goodwill, mutual respect and inclusiveness are valuable objectives for sure. But when it comes to the reality of fiscal spending, they ultimately pale in significance in comparison to the real goals of hosting: Japan's National Olympic Committee aspires to see Japan placing third or higher in the gold medal ranking at the 2020 Games.

Notes

- 1 www.o.p.edu.metro.tokyo.jp/opedu/static/page/open/pdf/teaching-materials/11_article_h29.pdf.
- 2 "Olympic Values Education" toolkit: www.olympic.org/olympic-values-and-education-program/about-the-toolkit?
- 3 Sasakawa Sports Foundation. 2015. "Waga kuni no supōtsu yosan no kenshō. Supōtsu yosan to supōtsu kihon keikaku" [Auditing the sports budget in Japan]. Tokyo: SSF.