

Authority, Embodied Teaching, and Liminal Education in Japanese Child Welfare: Between Abuse and Discipline

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Introduction

Child welfare systems are spaces which subvert normative family dynamics because children who enter care often have absent, fragmented, or otherwise unsettled kinships. This subversion impacts learning and education as well: being in care may complicate student-instructor relationships and normative practices surrounding school-based pedagogy. In this paper, I discuss the embodied strategies and tactics of elementary school children in care and their caregivers in an afterschool study hall in a large-scale residential care institution, the Juniper Academy.ⁱ I conducted yearlong ethnographic fieldwork here, focusing on the relationship between local practices of care and their mediation of stakeholder well-being.ⁱⁱ This field site is an interesting setting to consider education because while under the umbrella of social welfare, the Juniper Academy was multiple places at once: a clinic, a school, a home, an office, a gym, a cafeteria, and more. The Juniper Academy is one of nearly 600 child protection institutions tasked by the state to look after children separated from their parents—children who may have experienced abuse, illness, and/or disability. The data this paper draws on comes from participant observation and informal interviews with children and staff in the study hall where I assisted as a volunteer aid.ⁱⁱⁱ I saw how teachers enacted a carefulness around the children to avoid being perceived as abusive, a practice that helped reshape the study hall into a subversive educational space—children ignored caregiver requests, talked back, and disrupted study.

Study Time at the Juniper Academy: A Vignette

Located in a residential neighborhood in suburban Tokyo, the study hall at the Juniper Academy was often busy with the sounds of conversation. The children would jest and joke with each other, question and complain about their homework, and tell the adults about their day. Children would arrive one by one as they came back from school, coming into the hall to begin their homework. Set in a large, windowed multi-purpose room, complete with long folding tables, stiff-backed plastic folding chairs, and a variety of playthings in cabinets, the room was always a crowded social space once everyone arrived. Large sliding windows let in the afternoon sun. Through these conversations I learned about the children’s personalities and histories. One day, for example, several children discussed at length with each other their family histories—from hometowns to missing parents.

The children molded the study hall into a complicated educational space, and I noticed a pattern in how staff took on the role of teacher as they helped with schoolwork. Everyone was, to varying degrees, lax in overseeing the children’s work ethic and correcting mistakes. Similarly, there were

hardly any consequences for not following staff instructions. Children regularly did not do their homework, ignored adults' requests, and played or socialized. One student, for instance, did not complete his arithmetic problem set, instead turning around to talk with his friend. After a care worker repeatedly asked them, without success, to do their math assignment, they went over and did it themselves—and the child turned to watch. Megumi, a care worker, said that “[we] try our best to help children complete their schoolwork, but because of the situation [of being in the welfare system], we do not enforce much.” On the other hand, staff were quick to reward children for success. Megumi, for example, exclaimed with glee when a girl revealed she received an A on a weekly school quiz—Megumi had the other children, staff, and me congratulate her.

Staff said that children, especially the older ones, understand that they, the children, held real power. The reason was that the children knew that they could report the staff to the administration for being abusive, potentially getting staff disciplined or even terminated—and this had happened. This is interesting because child abuse is a prominent social concern in Japan; staff were keenly aware of the need to be mindful of how they treated children. Staff could not easily administer punitive action and were sensitive in how they asked and behaved. New employee and volunteer training sessions contained meticulous notes on how to interact with children. Adults were advised, for example, to avoid physical contact and speaking too casually. As to how children relayed their occasional complaints, they could talk with staff or use a secure comment box in the head office. Staff encouraged children to submit notes about sensitive matters that they could not otherwise discuss, which were read exclusively by the upper administration. Informational posters around the facility persuaded children to “raise their voice” about any issues they had, safeguarding it as their human right. I also found that children in the study hall knew about the national child abuse reporting hotline, “189.” Reporting tactics extended into digital spaces as well. Several negative online reviews of the Juniper Academy were written by former residents; they disparaged select staff for their lack of empathy. This brief snapshot of social life in care at the Juniper Academy illustrates the learning channels and sort-of failures that occurred in a liminal educational space.^{iv} The study hall was intended for formal education, but much of the learning that occurred was informal, happenstance, and subversive. This image of daily life muddles the popular narrative of child welfare institutions being strict, harsh places to live.

Between Abuse and Discipline

The ambivalence towards completing schoolwork was a relational strategy embodied by the care workers, shaped by their interactions with children. This teaching style shares similarities with, yet diverges from, those found in the primary school system. Scholars of early childhood education in Japan have documented how the school is a key site of socialization and national identity building (Hendry 1986, Holloway 2000, Peak 1992). Looking at instructors' teaching style, Akiko Hayashi and Joseph Tobin (2015, 19-38) describe that the notion of ‘watching over’ (*mimamoru*) may play a key role. This is characterized by a passive approach to intervention, and Hayashi and Tobin suggest how this embodied technique helps promote cooperation and independence in

children by letting them work out interpersonal issues on their own terms. The authors comment, however, that Western observers have perceived this strategy as abusive because teachers would not intervene in interpersonal conflicts. Susan Holloway (2010, 122) notes that child-rearing tactics, like school-based pedagogies, have also been characterized by an orientation towards encouraging empathy, independence, and obedience. These techniques comprise a discourse on instilling children with a sense of discipline, a value that features regularly in both education and child-rearing (Holloway 2010, 119-124).

Discipline (*shitsuke*) in contemporary Japan has a historically esteemed role in socialization, following a conditioning approach through “tough love” (*ai no muchi*, lit. ‘whip of love’).^v Abuse (*gyakutai*) occupies an opposing role because child abuse is a prevalent social issue. Discipline and abuse are topics of domestic debate as critics have noted how socialization practices can be excessive. Child abuse rates continue to rise year after year; it carries stigma due to the high prevalence of child abuse discourse in the media, such as news coverage and public awareness campaigns (Chapman 2024, 17-18). Abuse classifications follow World Health Organization criteria: physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, and neglect (Chapman 2024, 107). Caseworkers informed me that physical and sexual abuse are often easy to determine because the body is evidence. However, there are no clear-cut definitions for determining psychological abuse and neglect. This is notable because there are checkered boundaries between abuse and discipline in Japanese schools as well, such as the continued presence of corporal punishment as a means of discipline and abuse of teacher authority (Miller 2013). The ambiguity between discipline and abuse shaped, in part, the educational practices in the study hall. Staff expressed an aversion to being perceived as an abuser, and children demonstrated their bounded authority by acting contrary to study hall workers’ directions. Many care workers took their job seriously and stated a genuine interest in helping children excel academically. Yet, care workers I spoke with also told me that they did not know the boundary between abuse and discipline themselves as corrective acts were increasingly becoming seen as abuse. They also said that their chief concern—and job—was to ensure children were in a safe, secure, and happy environment—care and protection were of paramount importance. The way of teaching my interlocutors enacted complicates the narrative of ‘watching over.’ Care workers were guided by an apprehension toward being watched by the children and disciplined by the Academy administration. This self-discipline, conversely, seemed to promote a lack of educational success in the children, who often received mediocre grades. Yet, the children enjoyed themselves because they turned the study hall into a time of play. At the heart of the matter, potentially, was the mediation of individual well-being. This microcosm of learning did not follow a cultural script, but emerged as a situated, relational practice between stakeholders, shadowed by the increasing diffusion of children’s rights, ethics guidelines, and new forms of social precarity in the welfare system (Allison 2013, Chapman 2024). In broader perspective, public concern for child abuse and its impact on relational practices in the Juniper study hall complement Andrea Arai’s (2016) analysis of how national unease around socioeconomic downturn reframed childhood and education into discursive scapegoats for societal disruption.

Increasing awareness of inequities, issues, and rights in relation to children's social care—including the competing ways in which they are talked about and addressed—and the continued estrangement of children from normative social and educational ideals speak to a larger system in flux. The Juniper Academy care workers oversaw children's studying with a hands-off approach, yet the context underscores multiple levels of surveillance and structural change. The children's bounded position of authority, then, may be a product of this nebulous political-pedagogical assemblage.

Conclusion

In this paper I have described how education took on unexpected forms in an afterschool study hall in a child welfare institution. Children's and care-worker-turned-teachers' strategies and tactics were negotiated in the context of a controlled, political space—children knew they held the power to report adults; care workers adjusted their teaching styles to allow children more leeway in completing schoolwork and chores. This situated, embodied form of teaching emerged out of a relational space which endowed children with the authority to decide who was involved in their day-to-day lives. Child welfare can be a complicated space not only of kinship, but also of education. Topics like this offer an interesting point of departure for future research on the politics of education vis-à-vis child protection.

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Author Biography

Christopher Chapman is a cultural and medical anthropologist with complementary training in sociology and social work. His research explores the intersections of care, personhood, and structural inequality, focusing on the mediation of authoritative knowledge and local ways in which people manage their well-being. He also has interests in research design and ethnographic writing, prioritizing questions of power, responsibility, and equity.

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ⁱ The names of places and people are pseudonyms.

ⁱⁱ Child protection is a messy space to be in, and I acknowledge that this research indexes many questions of responsibility, reflexivity, and intention. Please see (Chapman 2023) for an essay which explores my positionality. This research was funded by a Fulbright Graduate Research Fellowship, the Japan Foundation Endowment Committee, and the University of Oxford.

ⁱⁱⁱ The number of children with whom I regularly interacted was approximately 30, and in total over 100 children aged 2-18 were in-residence at the Juniper Academy. For more details, see (Chapman 2024, 24-33).

^{iv} The social climate of the study hall often varied depending on who was present; everyone had their favorites and people they wanted to avoid.

^v For a detailed history of this discourse, see (Miller 2009, 234-245).