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Collaborative Efforts to Build Interpersonal Skills
and Emotional Maturity Across School Levels
Through Tokkatsu:

The Case of Kuwabara Junior High School and Elementary School

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Author's Note

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Abstract

In Japan, curriculum activities called *tokkatsu* (*tokubetsu katsudo*, or *special activities*) have long been practiced universally as part of the official curriculum. This type of curriculum helps support children's holistic development and builds school communities of learning.

This working paper offers an example of the Japanese model through the case of a junior high school in Ehime Prefecture. The distinctive feature of schools in Ehime Prefecture is that lesson study in *tokkatsu* has been traditionally delivered as a collaborative effort between elementary and junior high schools (*shochu renkei*). This paper, therefore, introduces how the *tokkatsu* is used to build interpersonal skills and emotional maturity across school levels. The latter half of this paper, compares the teaching plans (*jugyo keikaku an*) of classroom meetings (*gakkyukai*) for 6th and 7th graders and illustrates the similarity between the classroom meetings.

Keywords: tokkatsu, lesson study, transition from elementary to junior high school, interpersonal relationships, shochu renkei

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Introduction

As in many other countries, in Japan, when elementary school children enter junior high school, the environment changes, and children need to adjust themselves to a new environment and develop relationships there. For example, each class has a classroom teacher in elementary school, but when children enter junior high school, they are taught by a subject teacher, the teaching method changes, and club activities also start for all grades. The club activities are constructed as educational activities to build the foundation of character, and they are understood as part of education under the distinct educational philosophy in Japan.

Some scholars have maintained that since the period wherein children become junior high school students overlaps with puberty, they undergo physical imbalance, which upsets their emotional well-being. This tends to result in a loss of self-confidence and children are said to become more self-aware and anxious (Coleman, 2011). In fact, many studies show that children in this transitional stage tend to feel anxiety and stress (Grills-Taquechel, Norton, & Ollendick, 2010; Koizumi, 1995). Therefore, it is a big challenge for them to experience the change of their environment in terms of psychological adaptation. Recently, the number of truant students and incidents of bullying have increased for junior high school, and it is indicated that more students have problems adjusting to their school. This has been a significant concern for Japanese society and is known as “*Chu-ichi-gap*” (*Chu-ichi* means the first year junior high school).

It can be said that whether children can adjust to the new environment after they enter junior high school is a big issue both for the children themselves and for Japanese society. “*Tokkatsu*” can become part of the solution.

Now, “*tokkatsu*” means special activities in Japanese schools, specifically, school events, classroom meetings (*gakkyukai*), the student council, cleaning the school by students and school lunch. “*Tokkatsu*” is designed to develop children’s socioemotional competence and has been practiced as part of the official curriculum in Japan. It is included in the national curriculum standards (see Tsuneyoshi, 2012) and is designed to build interpersonal skills and to develop character and emotional maturity. Such activities are consistent with what scholars have suggested, namely that having feelings of self-worth and feeling accepted by others helps students adjust to junior high school (Grills-Taquechel, Norton, & Ollendick, 2010; Kingery & Erdley, 2007). Thus, activities targeting such areas, like “*tokkatsu*”, have important meanings for children’s adjustment to junior high school life.

Therefore, this working paper introduces an example of elementary-junior high school collaboration (*shochu renkei*), between Kuwabara Elementary and Junior High School in Ehime Prefecture, in developing students’ competence and improving junior high school itself and students’ academic performance.

The School Site: Kuwabara Junior High School

The school is located in the Kuwabara district, in eastern Matsuyama City in Ehime Prefecture. It used to be an agricultural district, but in recent years, the district has experienced the rapid development of residential homes, and has become a “bed town” for Matsuyama City (Kuwabara Chugakko, 2014).

The staff are a total of 41 individuals including the principal, vice principal, 28 teachers, one nurse and other more specialized staff. Although the division of labor is

low compared with the situation in some other countries, there are now certain specialists, such as the assistant language teacher (ALT), a person in charge of assisting students' transition from elementary school to junior high (*chu-ichi-gap*), and support staff.

There are 482 students in the regular classroom, 12 in the special education classroom, and 494 in total. There are four classrooms in the first year (153 students), four in the second year (157 students), and five in the final year (177 students) (Kuwabara Junior High School, school pamphlet for the 2014-2015 school year) .

In an interview, Mr. Minenori Takeda, the principal of Kuwabara Junior High School, said that at the time when the school first started focusing on "*tokkatsu*", teachers struggled to manage their classrooms, the number of truant students was more than 30 in a school year, and the school faced problems with life guidance for students. In one incident, more than 60 windows were broken in a day at school. The event was shocking enough to be reported in the local newspaper. Under these circumstances, lesson study in "*tokkatsu*" as the core educational effort, was started in 2012. It gradually built interpersonal relationships for students, communities between classrooms and the school, and collegial relationships among teachers. Three years later, the number of truant students had decreased to one-third its previous size and academic performance had improved.

A distinctive feature of the educational efforts by Kuwabara Junior High School is that "*tokkatsu*" has been delivered as a collaborative effort between it and the Kuwabara Elementary School. Mr. Minenori Takeda said that in Ehime Prefecture, there is a tradition that elementary and junior high schools collaborate in offering "*tokkatsu*" and Kuwabara Elementary and Junior High School have been doing this. How is "*tokkatsu*" implemented? I will describe the practices below⁽¹⁾.

The Contents of Schools' Efforts

Kuwabara Elementary and Junior High School had been repeating experiments and practices of “*tokkatsu*” for four years with the theme “Value the bond with other people.” Since last year, with the new theme “Deepen the bond with other people,” they have emphasized relations with other people and advanced research about mental bonding, focusing on emotional maturity. When they collaborate with each other on experiments and practices of “*tokkatsu*,” they intentionally make the following efforts.

1. Teachers from both schools participate on the lesson study of “*tokkatsu*” in each other’s schools.
2. They hold joint meetings to enhance mutual understanding about the direction of “*tokkatsu*.”
3. They reconsider the subjects of class activities in the annual teaching plans for 6th and 7th graders, select agendas and subjects carefully, and discuss them to ensure smooth relationships between the two schools.

In addition, the schools give elementary school students opportunities to meet with junior high school students to let them know about themselves. First, the junior high school invites the elementary school students who live in the same district to attend their club activities. They also arrange a school orientation as the junior high school several times a year. Every year in July, the junior high school sends the 7th graders back to their own elementary school to explain about their junior high school. The reason the school sends students, not teachers, is that elementary school students can feel much more at ease entering junior high school if they have received an orientation directly from older students just a few months beforehand.

The common factors of both schools’ efforts are 1) setting goals for the classroom, 2) satisfying discussion activities, 3) creating a school mascot, and 4)

conducting block activities, which are vertically divided into group activities. The details of each are explained below.

1) Setting goals for the classroom

Teachers ask students to think of their school life as a “story” that they create by themselves in both elementary and junior high school and have meetings for setting goals for their classroom at the beginning of the school year. They treat these goals as the beginning of the story. Both schools display the goals on the back wall of the classrooms.

2) Satisfying discussion activities

For efficient and satisfying meetings, the elementary school makes classroom meeting notes and the junior high school makes handbooks on how to conduct meetings. The classroom meeting notes address how to select subjects, how to conduct a planning committee for classroom meetings, and how to speak so that any students can conduct meetings by themselves as hosts. Additionally, personal records in the classroom meetings are accumulated in the notes so that students can look back on the meetings. The junior high school gives each student the handbook so that they understand the rules of meetings.

3) Creating a school mascot character

Both students from the two schools came up with the idea to create a school mascot for each school. The mascot is a symbol of all the students' cooperating at school assemblies and events for the elementary school, as well as being, for the junior high school, a symbol of “environment and safety” in an educational campaign to protect swallows, which fly to the school every year. Next, they organized a project team to create the school mascots, invited all the students to design and name the mascots, and created one for each school. At the junior high school, before they designed the character, students visited a university and received advice from a professor; then, they organized a judging committee for the mascot of Kuwabara Junior High School and decided on the design. Their new challenge was reported in the local newspaper and spread across schools in other areas. The principal said that the mascot is used in many places, presenting opportunities for the students to feel confidence in themselves.

Figure 1. The Mascot of Kuwabara Junior High School



4) Block activities that are vertically divided into group activities

At both the elementary and junior high school, students are divided vertically into mixed age blocks at their athletic meeting(*taiiku-taikai*), which is called “block activities,” to deepen the bond between students in different grades. At the elementary school, they value mixed age group activities by creating mascots for each block and holding game tournaments between blocks. In addition, in junior high school, they introduce the “block activities” at several school events such as athletic meetings and the chorus festival.

These “block activities” became a place where students showed their leadership in a small group. Within the “block activities,” they are vertically divided into teams, and within these teams, they perform litter cleanup activities and sometimes play together during lunch break at the elementary school. Thus, the 6th graders can show their leadership as team leaders. At the junior high school also, so that many students might have the opportunity to become leaders, 9th graders play the central role as leaders in the athletic meetings and chorus festival. Teachers are assigned to blocks, and a teacher on each block helps the leader. Furthermore, the school invites speakers from NPOs to conduct seminars on leadership training so that students and teachers have opportunities to think about what leaders should be like.

Figure 2. A Block Activity in Kuwabara Junior High School



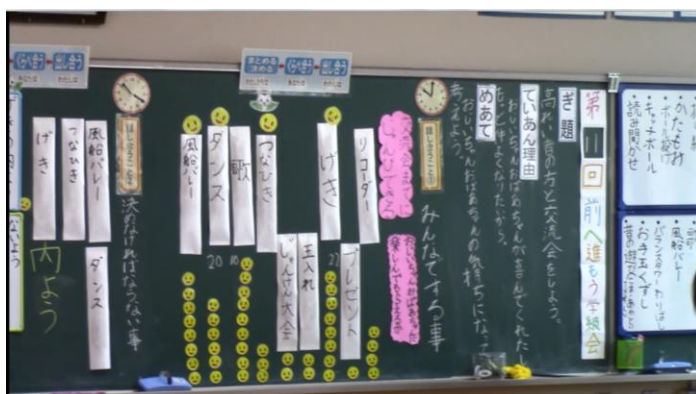
Classroom Meeting (“*Gakkyukai*”)

Next, we will explore what kind of efforts are made during the hourly classroom meetings. Since the distinctive feature of Ehime Prefecture is the joint development of “*tokkatsu*,” which is delivered through a collaborative effort between elementary and junior high schools, I compared teaching plans for 6th and 7th grade classes that were strongly related to the shift from elementary to junior high school. I present the results of the research on the two schools specifically by showing the similarities between the 6th and 7th graders.

The common element of the two teaching plans is the meeting procedure. The class begins with greetings, followed by the introduction of the speaker, and an

explanation of the reason the proposal or topic is being presented. At the general meeting, “the main idea” is set, and discussing it is the starting point. After the meeting, there is time for the students to reflect back on the discussion individually using worksheets and classroom notes. Finally, the teacher talks about what is expected for the next steps and how to be motivated.

Figure 3. A Classroom Meeting in Kuwabara Elementary School



with some closing words.

Significant effort is devoted to ensuring that the discussion continues smoothly. For example, elementary school students are told to write previously stated opinions on short strips of papers and write their own opinions in the classroom notes before the meeting. In the discussion, they move the papers on the black board so that they can see how the various opinions relate to each other in agreement. The papers are sorted by different colors according to the type of opinions, so it is easy to organize the opinions. Furthermore, not only general meetings but also small group meetings make the discussion efficient. In junior high school, there is a time to set the rules of discussion and topics. Proposed ideas are shown on a TV monitor during class to enhance efficiency. Students are expected to present not only the pros and cons of various ideas but also constructive proposals at the general meeting, and they are guided to a high-level discussion. In this way, both schools apply significant efforts in designing classroom meetings, and teachers reconsider the topics of classroom activities in the annual education plans for 6th and 7th graders. These efforts help 6th graders adjust to junior high school when they become junior high school students.

Results of the Efforts

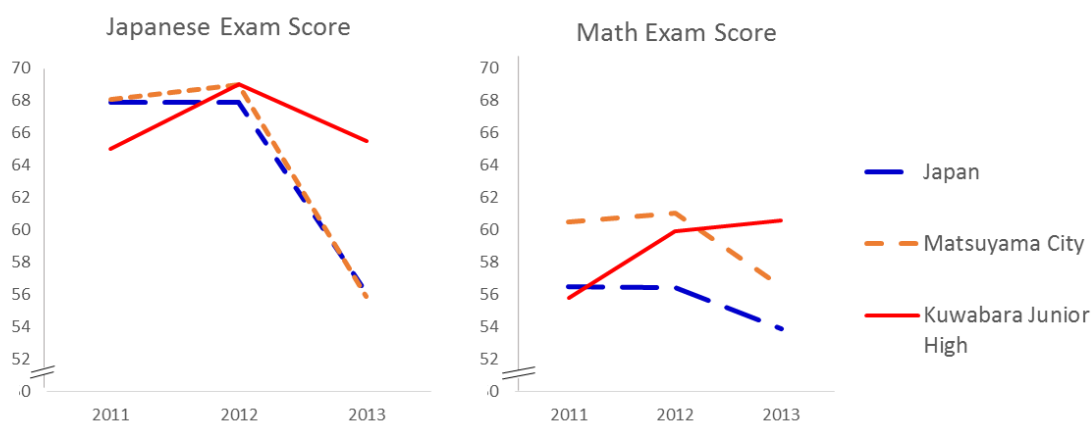
As a result of the efforts in “*tokkatsu*,” not only have classes made good progress and become more organized, but also the number of truant students has decreased and academic achievement has improved. The number of truants dropped from 34 students in 2011 to 14 students the next year and 11 students in 2014. Behind this success was the school community built by “*tokkatsu*” and the school support offered to students in the form of self-learning texts and the direction of a psychological counselor. Furthermore, truant students received home visits by not only the psychological counselor but also the principal and teachers participating in student guidance. This assistance follows the school’s philosophy of fostering children’s holistic development.

Positive outcomes were also seen in academic performance. In the nationwide exam, taken by 60 to 70% of students in Japan, Kuwabara Junior High School had been the second worst school in the area. However, three years later, it achieved the top level in their area, and their score substantially exceeded the national and local averages (Figure 4).

Conclusion

In Japan, “*tokkatsu*” has been practiced for fostering children’s holistic development in a calm classroom atmosphere. At Kuwabara Junior High School, positive outcomes were seen in terms of children’s adjustment and building communities, and these results are supported by other case studies of “*tokkatsu*” (Komoto, 2014; Taruki & Ishikuma, 2006). In terms of academic ability,

Figure 4. Average Score of Japanese and Math Nationwide Exam Score⁽²⁾



cognitive skills do not predict the strength of future socioemotional skills, but it is suggested that socioemotional skills have a positive impact on cognitive skills in the U.S., South Korea, and some other countries (OECD, 2015).

Thus, “*tokkatsu*” supports children’s holistic development, which cannot be achieved only through activities focused on academic subjects. “*Tokkatsu*” also

includes activities supporting children's development throughout the nine years of compulsory education, i.e., six years of elementary school and three years of junior high school. Currently, a growing number of schools encourage elementary school students to experience club activities at junior high schools and form partnerships in classes and school events, information exchanges regarding students' guidance and safety, and collaboration in curricula. Kuwabara Elementary and Junior High School collaborate on lesson study in "*tokkatsu*" to help students adjust to junior high school. Certainly, these examples are only part of their effort. Nevertheless, they demonstrate the collaborative effort between elementary and junior high school. Considered from the view point of whole child education, the practice of "*tokkatsu*" as a collaboration between an elementary and junior high school, in some cases a unified elementary--junior high school, is important for students to develop personalities and to continuously acquire knowledge in the transition from elementary to junior high school. The example of Kuwabara suggests that such education work to prevent children's maladjustment and improves the school system. It is expected that, in the future, we will see how the bonds among students are deepened and how the students achieve internal growth through the "*tokkatsu*" practiced in collaboration between elementary and junior high schools.

Notes

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(1) “*Tokkatsu*” research conference document, October 31, 2014 and an interview with Minenori Takeda on February 25th, 2015.

(2) An interview with Minenori Takeda on February 25th, 2015.

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APPENDIX

The School's Motto

Every Japanese school has a common slogan, which guides, in a wide sense, where the school is supposed to be heading—at least ideally. For Kuwabara Junior High School, the slogan (2014) is: “Developing Kuwabara Junior High School Students who can Think for Themselves, Judge for Themselves, and Mutually Learn from Their Peers and Put That Into Action” (Mizukara kangae, mizukara handanshi, nakama to manabiatte kodosuru Kuwabarachusei no ikusei).

The goal for the type of student that they wish to educate is as follows:

Love: Students who value themselves and their peers

Resilience 鍛え : Students who take their own initiative in engaging in learning and in various activities; students who are optimistic and energetic (genki)

Respect: Students who strive to better human relationships, and who value their hometown 郷土

This image of the student goes together with the image of the teacher (teachers who students have faith in, and who have great leadership), and the ideal school (a school where each one can become the “main actor/actress” shujinko).

(From the School Pamphlet (Gakko Yoran), H26 (2014), for Kuwabara Chugakko).

Daily Schedule

Kuwabara Junior High has 29 hours per week, in all grades (1—3).

1. 7:50—8:15

“reading for refreshing the heart” (kokoro no dokusho) & Independent study

2. 8:15—8:25

Morning meetings (asa no kai)

(Note) On Wednesdays, there is a schoolwide meeting (chorei, seito chokai) from

7:50—8:25

8:40—9:30 First hour

9:40—10:30 Second hour

10:40—11:30 Third hour

11:40—12:30 Fourth hour

12:30—13:10 Lunch and brushing one's teeth

13:10—13:25 Recess

13:25—13:40 Cleaning

13:55—14:45 5th Period

14:55—15:45 6th Period

15:55—16:10 Afternoon meeting (kaeri no kai)

(From the School Pamphlet (Gakko Yoran), H26 (2014), for Kuwabara Chugakko).

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