

Chapter #10

COMMUNICATION SKILLS AND MORAL DEVELOPMENT BETWEEN ELEMENTARY AND MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS IN JAPAN

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ABSTRACT

The method of conducting moral lessons has changed in Japan since 2018. Specifically, the focus of moral lessons has shifted from emotional understanding to thinking and deliberation. Consequently, it is essential to consider the development of morality and the ability to think and deliberate in moral lessons. However, scant studies have been conducted in Japan on the teaching of elementary and middle school students' abilities to think and deliberate. Therefore, this study aimed to clarify the development of communication skills and morality in elementary and middle school students. The results revealed that communication skills declined with age, but morality enhanced as the students became older. No gender differences were discerned in the moral development of males and females from the sixth grade of elementary school to the ninth grade of middle school. Based on these results, this study offers implications regarding the methods for conducting moral lessons centered on thinking and deliberating.

Keywords: ability to deliberate, social perspective-taking, development, gender differences, Japan.

1. INTRODUCTION

A school subject targeting moral lessons existed in compulsory education in Japan since the end of World War II. While not a formal subject, the sessions were labeled “special time for moral lessons” (Kaizuka, 2015; Roesgaard, 2016). No national textbook was designated by the government, and moral lessons were conducted in different directions, depending on the teacher-in-charge. Therefore, instead formal moral lessons, varied activities were conducted concerning moral lessons—for example, seat changes, dodgeball festivals, or alternative lessons in other subjects. If formal moral lessons were conducted, they would involve the comprehension of supplementary readers or the interpretation of emotions sensed by characters in books (Nagata & Fujisawa, 2012; Fujisawa, 2019). Therefore, the “special time for moral lessons” had not played important roles in Japanese schools. Thus, despite some teachers actively conducting the “special time for moral lessons,” moral lessons did not improve in Japan for a long time (Araki, 2014; Maeda, 2015). The value of moral lessons is emphasized when the problem of severe bullying emerges in schools. However, educators did not focus on probing the development of morality in students.

In 2018, the curricular name of “special time for moral lessons” was altered to “special subject: moral lessons,” and teachers were required to award written grades to learners. Additionally, the contents of moral lessons in elementary and middle schools were clarified concretely. Consequently, teachers have been responsible for delivering the so-named “think and deliberate” moral lessons to their students. Specifically, teachers need to not only focus on emotional awareness but also on thinking and deliberating. However, as the above discussion of the context clarifies, the morality of students has not been objectively measured,

and the ability of students to think and deliberate has not been appropriately examined. Additionally, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology has informed schools and teachers to award grades in moral lessons to students in their report cards. However, the historic shift in moral lessons made it necessary to partially measure morality as well as the thinking and deliberating abilities of students. Therefore, schools need to develop curricula and educational method to match the development of these abilities. It is thus imperative to clarify the development of their abilities to think and deliberate. Although some studies have been conducted on the development of morality in elementary and junior high school students in Japan (Yamagishi, 1995; Sakurai, 2011), research has not been undertaken on the development of the abilities of thinking and deliberating. Of course, recent moral research has been examined not only from cognitive aspects but also from various other aspects, such as neuroscience, emotion, behavior, and personality, in multiple proximity studies. However, this study deals with cognitive aspects in relation to moral education, which Japanese education emphasizes. Accordingly, the present study purposes to examine the communication skills and moral development of elementary and junior high school students.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1. History of moral developmental studies in Japan

The Defining Issues Test developed by Rest (1979) based on Kohlberg's stages of moral development (Kohlberg, 1971) has frequently been used worldwide to measure moral development (Bailey, 2011). It has also been employed to measure moral development in children in Japan (e.g., Yamagishi, 1995; Sakurai, 2011). Studies have evidenced that Japanese children advance through the stages of moral development just as students in other countries. Further, differences in moral development have been observed between males and females from the fifth grade of elementary school up to university (Sakurai, 2011). Sugawara, Nagafusa, Sasaki, Fujisawa, and Azami (2006) also developed the Standard for Public Space Scale, which has been shown to correlate with Kohlberg's stages of moral development (Fujisawa, Azami, Nagafusa, Sugawara, and Sasaki, 2006). This instrument comprises five factors: egocentric, peer standards, regional standards, care for others, and public values. The first factor, egocentric, denotes the pursuance of self-autonomy and personal profit without displaying any concern for the impression created on others. Second, peer standards entail placing importance on aligning with contemporaries. Third, regional standards develop when importance is placed on local community approval. Fourth, care for others is inculcated through the recognition of the importance of concern for those who are unrelated. Finally, public values encompass alignment with public values and societal justice.

Previously conducted studies have revealed that third-year (ninth grade) junior high school students, high school students, and university students are more selfish than first-year (seventh grade) junior high school students (Fujisawa, 2019). Further, 12–15-year-olds (middle school students) in welfare facilities scored higher on the egocentric and peer standards factors than 16–18-year-olds in welfare facilities (high school students). Additionally, both groups registered low scores in the aspects of caring for others and public values (Nagafusa, Sugawara, Sasaki, Fujisawa, & Azami, 2012). Subsequently, Araki and Matsuo (2017) revised the social perspective-taking test corresponding to one of Kohlberg's moral development stages. However, no studies have been conducted on this aspect with elementary and middle school students. Therefore, the present study deemed it meaningful to shed some light on the development of the social perspective-taking ability of elementary and junior high school students.

2.2. History of communication skills studies in Japan

As aforementioned, surprisingly few studies have been conducted on the thinking and deliberating abilities of students and on how these skills develop in Japan, apart from Kusumi, Murase, and Takeda's (2016) study on measuring the development of critical thinking attitude in elementary and middle school students. However, Syoji, Adachi, T., Takahashi, K., and Mifune (2012) reviewed studies regarding communication skills scales, revealing the following facets: associative, nonverbal, self-assertive, and emotive. Syoji et al. (2012) noted that communication has been related to several aspects of interpersonal relationships but has rarely been associated with behavioral and thinking elements such as thinking and deliberating. Communication with peers is not directly associated with thinking and deliberating; however, Iida and Ishikuma (2002) found that eighth-grade students scored higher in this domain than ninth graders. These studies have not comprehensively measured the abilities of students to think and deliberate, nor have they examined the development of these capacities. Nonetheless, they appear to indicate that some of these social abilities decline with age. Finally, Ueno and Okada (2006) developed a communication skills scale comprising the following four subscales: listening/speaking, nonverbal skills, assertion, and deliberating. Their study seems to apprehend the thinking and deliberating abilities of students more comprehensively than previous studies. However, the development of these skills in elementary and middle school students is not clarified. Therefore, the present study attempts to illuminate the development of communication skills of students using this scale.

3. METHODS

3.1. Objective

This empirical study intended to elucidate the development of morality and communication skills in Japanese elementary and junior high school students and apply the obtained results to moral lessons focusing on thinking and deliberation.

3.2. Participants

The study included 76 sixth graders in elementary school as well as 120 seventh graders, 153 eighth graders, and 112 ninth graders in middle school, all of whom were enrolled in public schools in the Tokyo metropolitan area of Japan.

3.3. Procedure

A questionnaire survey was administered to the participants after obtaining consent from the school principal, the parents of the students, and the students. The classroom teacher for each class administered the questionnaire survey. The questionnaire items were the same for elementary school and junior high school students, but the *kanji* deemed difficult for elementary school students were converted to *hiragana* on the questionnaires. Three school managers checked the survey instrument before it was administered.

3.4. Survey content

Araki and Matsuo's (2017) social perspective-taking test developed with reference to Kohlberg was employed to test moral development. Ueno and Okada's (2006) communication skills scale comprising the four factors of listening/speaking, nonverbal skills, assertion, and deliberation, was administered.

3.5. Scoring

The manual was employed to calculate the developmental stage score on the social perspective-taking test (Araki & Matsuo, 2017). The higher the score, the higher is the participant’s social perspective. The relevant manual was also utilized to calculate each subscale score on the communication skills scale (Ueno & Okada, 2006). High scores in each subscale indicated advanced levels of the particular factor.

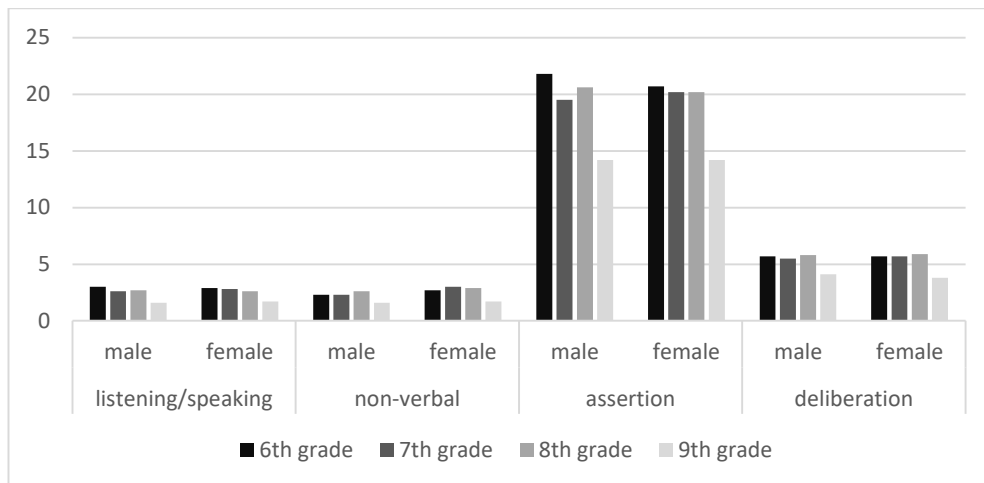
4. RESULTS

ANOVA was performed on the data obtained from the participating elementary and junior high school students in Japan to clarify morality, communication skills, and the development of these aspects.

An analysis of variance was performed on each subscale score of communication skills (listening/speaking, nonverbal expression, assertion, and deliberation) as the dependent variable, and grade (sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth) and gender as two factors.

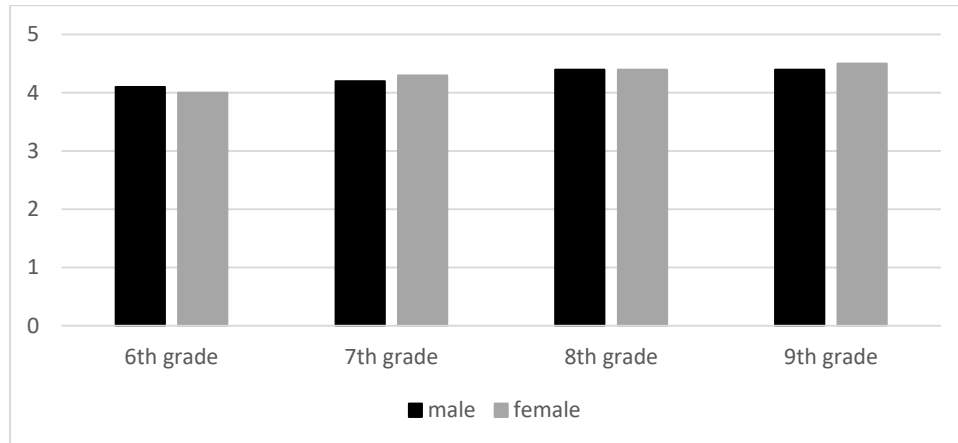
The results revealed all grades registered significant scores (listening/speaking: $F [3] = 64.4, p < .001$; nonverbal: $F [3] = 43.3, p < .001$; assertion: $F [3] = 78.7, p < .001$; deliberation: $F [3] = 56.6, p < .001$) (Figure 1). The interaction between grade and gender was significant for nonverbal communication. No gender differences were found. Listening/speaking, assertion, and deliberation scores were higher for the sixth, seventh, and eighth-grade students than for the ninth-grade participants ($p < .001$) when multiple comparisons were performed using the Bonferroni method for all variables. Nonverbal communication was the only exception.

Figure 1.
Subscale communication skills scores for each grade.



An analysis of variance was performed with each subscale score of social perspective-taking as the dependent variable and grade and gender as two factors. The results revealed significant scores for all grades ($F [3] = 11.9, p < .001$) (Figure 2). Multiple comparisons were also performed using the Bonferroni method. The social perspective-taking scores were higher in the seventh than in the sixth grade ($p < .001$), higher in ninth than the seventh grade ($p < .05$), higher in the eighth than in the sixth grade ($p < .001$), and higher in the ninth than in the sixth grade ($p < .001$). No gender differences were found.

Figure 2.
The social perspective-taking test scores.



5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study aimed to clarify the development of morality and communication skills in elementary and junior high school students and suggest educational methods based on the developments. The ability of social perspective-taking was considered an aspect of morality in this study.

The results of this study illuminated that social perspective-taking increases from the sixth grade of elementary school to the ninth grade of middle school, while communication skills decrease. No studies have been conducted to test social perspective-taking in elementary and middle school students using Araki and Matsuo's (2017) revised instrument. The current study is thus significant because it offers basic statistics on this parameter. In addition, the result that social perspective-taking is an ability acquired and developed as children grow older is aligned to the outcomes of previous studies on morality conducted in Japan using other scales and tests. The results suggest that as Japanese children age, they understand varied roles and positions and make social decisions considering these functions and stations.

Conversely, all the subscale scores of communication skills diminished as students became older. This outcome implies that the abilities of listening and speaking, nonverbal expression, assertion, and deliberation decline in students from elementary to junior high school. Iida and Ishikuma's (2002) study on the communication skills of middle school students in Japan also demonstrated that scores decreased from 8th to 9th grade, and the results of the present study partly echo the findings of Iida and Ishikuma (2002).

Moreover, this study offers fresh evidence that the decline in communication skills occurs not just through the three years of middle school but spans the entire stretch from elementary school to the ninth grade of middle school. This result could be perplexing: communication skills declined from elementary school to middle school as varied other thinking abilities developed. The rationale of adolescence could be posited as a possible answer to the anomalous outcome: perhaps middle school students command and can use the aspects of communication skills described in the survey items. However, they could think that the direct displaying of their communication abilities could be awkward for them or

make their communication recipients feel discomfited. Therefore, the scores of communication skills could appear to decline at first glance because direct communication skills are disused as students grow and can consider and imagine the feelings and positions of the other person. For example, the item of communication skills is not “to convey one’s opinion to the other person firmly” (what seems to be superficial), but if items such as “Think about the other person and put up with what you really want to say,” “Hesitate to convey your true intentions so as not to hurt,” and “Don’t bother giving different opinions in order to maintain future relationships with the other person” are prepared, the score will increase with aging. In particular, the fact that the communication skill score decreases and social perspective-taking score increases indicates that the participants think about others with aging.

Thus, “think and deliberate moral” lessons must be designed to tackle the possibility that junior high school students are adolescents who do not like to highlight their communication capacities. For example, the regular imperative to express ideas or think and deliberate on themes in groups could be consciously incorporated into the educational pedagogy and curriculum to make students actively think, deliberate, and articulate their ideas during moral lessons. It must also be recognized that the fact that students refrain from expressing their ideas or shy away from public deliberations at this developmental phase does not imply a lack of thinking and deliberation on the moral lessons imparted in schools. Therefore, worksheets could be employed so students can freely express and summarize their ideas without worrying about the eyes and ears around them. Thinking, deliberating, and accumulating experience are general skills that can be applied to moral lessons as well as myriad other situations. Therefore, teachers should impart moral lessons in manners that can refine these skills while according due consideration to the developmental characteristics of students.

5.1. Contribution and future research directions

The results of this study elucidated that the ability to acquire a social perspective increases with age and that the communication skills of children decrease as they grow from the sixth grade of elementary school to the ninth grade of junior high school. However, participants in younger grades must also be studied to clarify when the ability to acquire social perspectives increases and when communication skills begin decreasing. Additionally, future studies should consider whether the same questionnaire survey should be applied across all ages spanning from junior high school students to participants who are much younger. Nevertheless, the present study contributes to extant knowledge significantly by partially clarifying the development of these social abilities from elementary school to junior high school.

This study also disclosed in part the development of morality in students and the evolution of their ability to think and discuss over a broad age range, an aspect that has not thus far been illuminated. Therefore, it enables the introduction of curricular changes that actively seek to advance the abilities of thinking and deliberation through school lessons taking into account the developmental stage of students.

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